INTO THE ENCHANTED
EMPOWERING
THE
WOLF'S HEART
A RED RIDING HOOD RETELLING
AVA GRACE BENTLEY

EMPOWERING THE WOLF'S HEART

A LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD RETELLING

Ava Grace Bentley

Find Your Wings

Part of...

Into The Enchanted

A multi-author collection of fairytale retellings

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Chapter 1
Into the Enchanted

Those who made this possible

To all who feel broken.
I see you.

Prologue

"Will we see the dragon queen, Grandpa?" I asked, my voice low with reverence.

Grandpa chuckled, glancing down at my bouncing form with a doting smile. "We can call for her, but you never know with the dragon queen. Sometimes she's shy."

"Like Anna?"

"Hey! I'm not shy. People and I—"

"Just don't get along, I know," I replied, rolling my eyes.

Anna huffed and crossed her arms, but she was much too old at sixteen to roll her eyes.

"But we'll get to swim, right?"

"Of course! The waters are cool this time of year, a perfect way to cool down after a long adventure. What more do you see, little Alia? What more can you hear, little Anna?" Grandpa asked.

"Not this again," I complained, dropping his hand to run forward. Grandpa was always playing games, getting us to explore and see what we could find and name. It was always birds, animals, plants, et cetera, et cetera. And he also wanted us to name what they were good for and if they were poisonous or not. It was boring.

"Don't go too far. Your ma and pa are close behind us with your little brother," Grandpa said.

I didn't listen, because we were close. Grandpa had told us stories of the dragon queen and how she was a gentle ruler of her

kind, but a warrior of utmost horror were you to harm one of hers. And she apparently didn't like humans, but she typically wouldn't outright eat you.

I didn't really care. I just wanted to see her.

And it was whispered you could see her at our Special Place, which was a waterfall deep in Wintercrest woods. It was where Mom proposed to Dad. Mom was the daughter of the Red matriarch, who ruled our tribe much as a queen. So when Grandma told Mom to propose, as Dad was the strongest warrior outside of the ruling family, Mom obeyed. And that led to my sister and I, though my older sister wasn't strong enough for the training. She was pale and sickly, and Mom couldn't bear her to be heir of the matriarchy. The heirship would pass to one of us since Mom never became First Blade—a title you must obtain to become matriarch. And so I took Anna's place as heir apparent, meaning I was to train under Grandma until I could go on missions as a Red and earn my right to lead.

Reds were the baddest of the bad when it came to magical assassins. We saw magic, and we killed it. As a kid, I loved that. It gave me an evil to fight. Plus, it was my greatest hope to make Grandma proud.

Unfortunately, Grandma was never really anything except stern. And Grandma didn't come with us much on 'frivolous' activities like today. She wasn't often interested in anything with us except for what could help the tribe and *training.*

I held in a shudder, recalling my last sparring session. My side still held an ugly purple bruise that ached terribly from being a bit slow and getting a bo staff to the ribs. It was only the first of many bones I would bruise and break in my training.

I broke through the foliage. A sheer cliff rose before me, the stones tinged green with moss and plants. A massive, frothing white waterfall dove into the bright-blue pool of water at the base of the cliff, the gentle, meandering stream beginning to my right. Fairies darted in and out of the leafy undergrowth, touching mushrooms that glowed with emerald and turquoise hues along the water's edge.

Something moved at the edge of the far side, near the waterfall. My heart pulsed with excitement, but it dwindled as I realized the shape was a lot smaller than a dragon would be. Golden eyes met mine, and a pure black werewolf stepped from between the fronds of leaves and undergrowth and mushrooms to push his paws into the sandy loam at the edge. It was hard to see, but it was almost like the waterfall's mist gathered on the edges of his fur, giving him an ethereal glow. His eyes expressed his uncertainty, while the rest of his body was broad and strong and sure. On his left hip was a white spot shaped like a heart.

He leaned down, his eyes never leaving mine as he lapped at the water.

It felt like a dream. He was beautiful and wild. I had never seen a live werewolf before. They had all been dead when Grandma had shown me the best way to kill them.

He was alive in a way that defied explanation. Wild. Untamed.

Free.

He jerked his head upright, breaking eye contact to stare behind me. Then he leapt back the way he came. The tip of his tail had a white patch that was the last thing to disappear.

"You go fast, little sis," Anna said, leaning over and putting her hands on her knees.

I didn't answer her. I couldn't.

"You alright, little Alia? See a dragon?" Grandpa asked, ruffling my hair.

I batted him away, mock glaring at the grinning old fart. "Nope. No dragon," I said. I debated telling him about the werewolf.

But I didn't. Because I knew if I told him, he'd tell Grandma, who would put out a hunt for the werewolf's head. And I couldn't bear to see such a creature dead. Not after seeing him like that.

But that choice… it cost me my grandfather.

For it was that werewolf that killed him.

PART ONE

Change Is Painful

TO GAIN YOUR WINGS, YOU MUST FIRST ENTER YOUR CHRYSALIS.

CHAPTER 1

Curo

ALIA

TEN YEARS LATER

Getting your head ground into dirt, rock, and unidentifiable objects that looked like cacao nibs but smelled worse than a stable was not my idea of fun.

It all started with the scent of a werewolf. We Reds trained for years to enhance our senses to be the best killers. We would never outmatch a werewolf's senses, but if we could sniff out a werewolf before they even noticed we were human? Huge advantage when werewolves were stronger, faster, and overall had the constitution of a dragon.

My ear scraped a rock, drawing blood, and I hissed in a breath. "What are you doing here, Red?"

The freakin' dolt. My grasping fingers reached the blade resting in my boot—that twisting and pulling while getting my head ground into the dirt by the guy above me was an act of contortion—and drove it behind me.

The man hopped back. I twisted around, spitting out dirt and the odd, crunchy rock. "Baiting werewolves?" I said, casually spinning my dagger while wiping my chin on my shoulder.

Baiting was something I abhorred. Personally, I wouldn't lay out a scent to bring a werewolf running to protect their territory just to kill it. But the more pelts you brought in, the quicker you rose in the

ranks, which were the First through Two Hundred and Fiftieth Blades. I was Second Blade. Despite my aversion to baiting I still killed my fair share of magical creatures.

The guy stood from his crouch, his blonde hair messy from ambushing me. His eyes brightened and his smirk was downright heart-throbbing, if you were you into self-absorbed jerks.

"Aren't you on a mission?" Brandt, the Third Blade, said, his smirk growing.

"Aren't you supposed to be hunting unicorns?" A hint of bitterness colored my voice. He'd received the mission I liked; unicorns were fun to hunt. Most times we were dispatched because a unicorn had eaten a villager or some such. It was black and white: they were evil.

Not all of us, my bond whispered in my mind.

Fine, not all *of you are evil. Some are just semi-evil,* I replied to her in my brain. She snorted, and I wondered if the brain could get an infection from unicorn snot.

While most unicorns were evil, other forms of magic… Well, I'd seen a mage heal a woman who would've died in childbirth. I've seen weather mages stop a massive tsunami off the coast of Verbi, a seaside town thirty miles east of the capital of Mongolia, where I was currently on a mission.

Brandt was given the mission of hunting unicorns. They gave me the mission of assassinating the assassin Hood.

Great idea, right?

Grandma said this was how I would cement my bid as heir since I'd refused baiting. That was the only reason I didn't turn it down; I didn't enjoy killing. It was a simple thing to take a life physically, but looking into someone or something's eyes as it passed—it stole a portion of your soul. Not to mention each one felt like a scalpel taken to my innards because of my so-called Gift.

I had trained since birth to replace my grandma as matriarch of the tribe of Reds, the assassins who protected humans by destroying magic. That was my mission, to lead them after Grandma retires. But more than that, I wanted to make my family proud and bring

them honor after my failure resulted in my grandfather's death. And there was another thing… something that was changing inside me.

"Hood's a ghost. You may as well give up now," Brandt said.

"Lay off it, Brandt. She's the best of us. If anyone can get that Sixth forsaken creature, it's Curo."

My cheeks grew slightly red at the mention of my nickname. "Thanks, Graham," I said, my voice low.

Graham stepped up beside Brandt, his smile reaching his eyes. "Nothing but the best goes after the best," he said with a wink.

Brandt rolled his eyes. "You know she isn't the best, dude. She's good, yeah. But Hilda can beat our butts any day of the week. Why doesn't *she* go after Hood?"

Graham stared at Brandt as if he'd grown a second head. I checked my blades, making sure each one came out of their sheaths with gentle pressure. "Hilda is six months pregnant," I said blithely.

"So?" Brandt scratched under his arm, squinting up at the sky.

I exchanged a glance with Graham. Graham shook his head, motioning the sign of idiot while Brandt's eyes were elsewhere. I bit my tongue to hold in my grin.

"Pleasure, as always, Red, but we gotta go," Brandt said as the sun eased into the horizon.

Graham raised a brow. "Tavern maid on your mind?"

Were Brandt's cheeks red? "Shut up."

"What's her name?" I asked, a sly smile on my face.

Brandt narrowed his eyes. "Don't, *Curo*." He spat the name like a curse.

My grin grew innocent. "What? I wasn't planning anything."

His eyes narrowed into slits. "Last year you told Shiela my wife and two kids were languishing at home without me when you well know I have no wife."

I clapped a hand to my chest. "Oh, what will Bronny and Lassie do without their father? They miss him so, but the only one who truly knows what a scamp their father is, is his wife, Lila, who knows naught but the dreaded perfume of other women by which he comes home—"

"Stop," Brandt growled. Funny how much he sounded like the werewolves we hunted.

A slow grin crossed Graham's face. "Is that why Sheila slapped you? Twice?"

A low chuckle came from my chest before I could stop it. "She slapped you? Oh, what I wouldn't give to have seen that!"

Brandt gritted his teeth and stalked off, dust poofing with each step.

Graham shook his head again. He glanced up at me, then his eyes darted away. "How's your sister?" he asked.

My chest clenched at his question. "Anna is hanging in there. Mom has scheduled another healer to see if they can figure out what's wrong," I said.

He nodded, then shyly met my eyes before looking away again. "Would you like me to walk back to the tribe tonight?" he asked, his eyes once more darting to my face. There was a slight panic within, almost as if he were afraid of my answer.

I shifted my feet. "Sorry, but no. I've gotta infiltrate tonight. Only time I could bribe the gatemen. But thank you for the offer," I said, smiling.

His face fell. "Oh. Ok. *Audacia numquam amittere*," he said the typical Red goodbye, looking up with a tiny smile that didn't reach his kind blue eyes.

"*Audacia numquam amittere,"* I said, giving him a tiny smile.

It wasn't until I was halfway across the city and nearly to the nobleman's house that my brain caught up to what Graham was really asking.

"Dragon breath and poppycock," I hissed.

He was asking me to walk with him. As in, more than friends.

I was an idiot. More than an idiot, I was absolutely clueless about relationships. Give me a stick and a werewolf, and I'd fight any day. But social niceties were beyond me.

I turned my mind to my mission. I needed a werewolf to draw out Hood, and I had just the one in mind to do so.

A STATELY, sprawling, three-story mansion spread before me. The manor itself was whitewashed. Gold, vine-shaped filigree with ruby-red leaves trailed circular columns that upheld the second-floor balcony.

Glass windows were all along the three stories. Trailing cobblestone pathways webbed from the home, the meandering trails meeting statues, bubbling fountains, and even a mage-lit Ambrose tree—said to be renowned for their poison and their beauty with silken pink blossoms and green leaves with blue veins.

Shadows detached from beneath statues and towering bushes, their silent paws sending a trail of skittering nerves up my spine. So silent, so deadly. Long fangs which were designed to tear into meat, ears which can hear even the slightest change of heartbeat, a nose that can detect a squirrel from a mile out—none of these were the strongest part of the werewolf. If we found a lone werewolf, they were easy to put down. It was the pack you had to worry about. Injure one and a dozen were behind them to rip out your throat.

A dragon was stronger, but a werewolf pack could kill even the strongest elemental dragon.

I shook my head, focusing back on the house. And my target.

Sicario Hood was the goal. Drag him out and claim my place as heir.

Hood only emerged for two things: when he was sent to assassinate a Red, or when someone of high power was in danger.

He had been a glorified bodyguard a few times in recent history. Once for a stuck-up brat of a mage, though the mage was the only known Empath of our century. How an Empath could be a brat… The kid berated a maid for brushing his hair wrong. That was before Hood came on the scene. We were sent to make the kid pee his pants in fear and keep him straddling the line of truce between Reds and mages; instead, we ran off with our tails tucked because of Hood.

But the kid’s character didn’t entirely leave even Hood unscathed. The kid leapt on Hood’s back and clung to him like an overgrown spiderfish while screaming in Hood’s ear. There was a grimace of those perfectly straight teeth and that strong jawline beneath the black hood he was known for. With a werewolf's sense of hearing, that had to be excruciating. The kid reached a level of shrill even my youngest niece would be hard-pressed to meet.

By then, the red of our cloaks had blended back into the underbrush with the help of a spell that took them from red to a mottled brown and green, almost as though they were covered in mold.

I shook off the memories, trying to dampen the humor as the moon traveled higher in the sky. I sat in my little cubby in the tree, careful not to show any teeth even as I smiled. No teeth and stillness—two vital rules of the hunt. Werewolves saw the slightest movement, and white showing up in the dead of night would give me away just as bad as if I waved my hand or yelled. My body didn’t shiver at the cool breeze coming from the Dragon Mountains. In the middle of summer, the weather couldn’t quite decide if it wanted to be hot enough to melt metal or cold enough to freeze toes. Maybe it was because we were only ten miles from the ocean.

A pure black werewolf sniffed around a tree ten feet from the one I sat in. The wall was right beneath me, and a few times, I lost sight of the werewolf as he searched the perimeter.

A lighter, brown-and-white mottled werewolf with a black-tipped tail snuck up behind him. I watched as she leapt from a bush, but the male dodged and she face-planted into the dirt. She growled low in her throat as high-pitched sneezes accompanied the low growls. The male chuffed, which I took as laughter as he continued sniffing. They continued this cat-and-mouse game, the werewolf continuously evading the she-wolf with a patience I would never expect from blood-hungry animals.

I had watched werewolves before, but that was mostly in battle or during a hunt. Those didn’t wag their tails like puppies and they didn’t show this level of… play.

It reminded me of my younger siblings, specifically Jacob with his niece, Jess. Jacob was only thirteen, but he had the patience of our father while Jess inherited the spiciness of her mother. Jess continuously prodded her uncle, but she hardly ever got a rise from Jacob. Which made her pester him all the more.

The two werewolves were out of sight when the bell in the library sounded out twelve massive rings. The werewolves below gathered round the house, their paws clicking against rock and thudding against dirt. They gathered and then a resounding howl ripped through the yard as they tipped their heads back and released their voices at the full moon high overhead. That was the haunting melody that plagued my nightmares from times past, the yips and growls interposed over memory. But here in this place, these howls were just a song. A song of life and love and misery and hatred and joy and sorrow.

I felt the *needs* of this pack deep in my soul, as if their voices gave a direct link to my Gift.

One needed a raw steak as his blood was running low after a recent battle. Another was pining after a girl but needed to grow up.

The light-colored werewolf who'd pestered the black werewolf… I sucked in a breath. She sang a song of great need, though her voice didn't say it. Her howl was bright and contained traces of humor and cheer. Her body, however, screamed something else entirely. Her heart was crying. It was having a hard time pumping blood, something about a place that was nearly blocked from pumping in or out.

But… I thought werewolves didn't get sick? Their healing abilities should keep them from sickness, right?

This one's need pushed against my soul like the scraping of a blade against tender skin.

She was not my responsibility. If she died, it was just one less blood-thirsty werewolf to kill my siblings and family and tribe.

The black werewolf caught my eye. He was near the back of the pack, his song not quite as loud as the rest. A pure-white werewolf came over and nudged his neck, encouraging him to join. When he shook his head with a tiny growl, she bowed her head to him,

showing him her neck. The white werewolf, Lady Niveous, was the daughter of the current ruling Alpha Princess of Mongolia. She was one of four prince and princess rulers who governed their perspective races under the human king who presided over all in Mongolia.

My lips stretched in a broad grin. So my contact was correct. The son of the current ruling Alpha Princess was here; only he could gain a submission from Lady Niveous. I nearly cackled in glee.

If I were caught, the consequences would be dire. But the prince would bring Hood running. He might bring the entire kingdom running, but that was a chance I'd have to take.

Ran, change of plans, I said to my bond.

A low growl came into my mind. *Could you, just once, make things simple, Two-Legs?* she replied, irritation zinging from the bond connecting our souls.

My lips creased in a smile. *Come quickly. This is about to get fun.*

Your idea of fun and my idea of fun are two very different things.

Despite her grumbling, I felt her coming closer.

Showtime.

CHAPTER 2

Unicorn

ALIA

My wolfsbane pipe locked on my target who was moving away from the other werewolves. His dark eyes shot up to meet mine just as I took a breath. His nostrils flared.

The dart hit him in the chest. He hardly moved. Most werewolves jerked at the pain of the wolfsbane coated in silver, but not this one. It made my eyebrow quirk. What kind of monster didn't react to pain?

He shifted to his human form. Whoa. He was wearing clothes with knife hilts peeking through the shadows of his cloak. That meant the dude had coin. Only some could afford the large mana fee it took to give you an enchanted object which could hold your belongings until such a time as you shifted back to human form.

He stood upright, his eyes darting up to meet mine. They were dark and cold, a smile crossing his lips.

My arms tingled as adrenaline rushed through me. I blew a second dart, but he stepped to the side, avoiding the tiny dart with an ease that made my heart attempt to bruise my ribs.

Heck.

I blinked and he was beneath my tree. His speed was uncanny. I jumped, aiming for him like a bird of prey. His eyes widened, as if he were not expecting a human to just leap from a tree.

I twisted, avoiding his blade poised to enter my chest by a hairsbreadth. I hit the ground and rolled, popping back to my feet

and spinning to meet him. His blade came up to nick my throat even as I leaned back. Our blades clashed with the ring of steel. He showed no emotion as he stared down at me, our blades locked between us.

His muscles bunched and he pushed forward on his knife. My feet made divots in the ground as I winced from the strength he was showing, my blade slowly coming closer to my neck.

I backpedaled, pretending to trip over a root. I rolled in a reverse somersault. His blade nicked my arm, and I twisted to stare into his face with my blowgun to my lips. His eyes widened nearly imperceptibly.

The dart hit him in the forehead. He stumbled forward, and I stabbed him in the stomach. But he was already out.

Oops. I probably shouldn't have stabbed him, but he would live. I hoped.

His weight smashed me into the dirt. I felt his warm blood soaking into my leathers. That would be a pain to clean later.

A question was rolling in my head. Why didn't he call for help? He could've easily howled when the first dart—which should have laid him flat—hit. Instead, he acted like a lone werewolf who attacked and killed and asked questions later.

There had been murder in his eyes when he'd stared at me, and I feared what he would do if he woke in a position to attack. I would just need to ensure he had no way to get an advantage.

I snapped a spelled rope around his wrist that would help lesson his weight and used it to drag him to a side entrance while the other werewolves continued howling, their song covering my kidnapping. What the heck does he eat? Rocks? I was stout and we were close to the exit, but I was still huffing and puffing by the time I moved him ten feet.

A guard stood beside the door. Human—his eyes didn't glow in the scant light.

A dagger hilt to the temple was easy enough to get his keys from his pocket. Did they not have better trained guards?

My teeth nibbled my bottom lip as I tried the different keys in the lock. And… there. I jiggled the lock and heard it snip when a dagger

poked through my bodice. I froze.

"Why are you kidnapping me?" said a silky voice tinted with… was that humor?

"Can't a girl kidnap a pretty guy?" I said, my hands closing around my pipe. I pinched my skin to keep my heart rate from betraying the cold fear rushing through my veins at the sound of his voice.

"If one were that desperate to bag a mate, then I suppose it may be permitted—"

A swish of fabric was my only warning. I spun in a crouch, his dagger slicing where the back of my neck had been a mere moment before. His second dagger was coming for my eye when I blew another dart and leapt backward in an ungraceful crab walk, the wooden handle of the door banging against the back of my head.

He was much slower during his attack, likely due to the blood staining the dirt where I'd dragged him. It was my saving grace because that dagger would have killed me were I a scant moment delayed. It would have sliced easily through my hood to sever my spine just before my brainstem.

His eyes were dark as an onyx stone and seemed to suck the light from my soul. His lips quirked. "You are too pretty to be so desperate, little Red." He teetered and then he hit the ground for a second time. And I didn't bother to break his fall. Oops.

I sighed. "Pretty can hide some terrible ugliness," I said to his snore. His face was planted against the dirt and his hind end was up in the air. It couldn't have been comfortable, so I kindly kicked his butt over so he was on his side as I opened the door.

Most werewolves would be out for the night with the first dose I gave him. It was about then that I wondered if I'd caught more dragon than I could ride. But I was too deep in the mire to backtrack now. I'd just have to dose him every fifteen minutes and get his weapons off sooner than later.

I lugged his rock-hard body through the gate and found Ran waiting on the other side. Her white hide glimmered in the moonlight, making her a beacon for any passersby. Her neck was an

elegant arch leading to prim and proper ears and deep amber eyes over her long equine nose. “Dim the glow, nitwit,” I said.

Her lips peeled back, revealing pointed teeth instead of the usual flat teeth of a horse. *Because you asked so nicely,* she said, tossing her head and making her long mane ripple. She stomped a hoof and her hide became the shimmery dark night of an abyss with stars. It wasn’t any less eye-catching, but was definitely less noticeable in the dark, which was a win. Her amber eyes dared me to make her change again, so I huffed out a breath and lugged my catch onto her back, strapping him in place.

Couldn’t you have at least laid down so this would be easier? I asked as I wedged his upper body halfway over and then panted a few breaths. Why’d this guy have to have such long legs?

Do you expect me to read your mind, Two-Legs?

I huffed out an annoyed breath, then hopped on behind my kidnapee. That’s when I realized the night was strangely quiet with the sort of anticipation that makes your hair stand on end.

Uh-oh.

I looked back at the wall, and from inside the open door were multiple glowing twin pinpricks of light above shining ivory teeth.

“GO!” I hissed, leaning over my kidnapee to grab fistfuls of Ran’s mane.

She hesitated for one second, looking back at me. If a horse could raise a brow… “Please?” I bit out through clenched teeth.

As the princess asks, she said.

She reared, her hooves pawing the air as a werewolf snapped at my cloak and nearly ripped me off Ran’s back, then we were off. Her hooves pounded to the rhythm of my anxious heart.

A glance back made me squeak. Four werewolves as large as ponies were pounding after us, their eyes slits and their lips peeled back to reveal teeth as long as my finger.

Ran, we have company.

No joke! she shot back.

We were slowing down. Why the heck were we…

Oh.

Ran came to a stop as a werewolf stepped in front of us, cutting off our escape route. Ran snorted and bared her teeth, but the werewolves were less than impressed. They came from alleyways and hopped down from rooftops, landing with clacking paws and oddly gentle thuds for something that enormous. We were surrounded.

Ran was built for speed in the open plains, not tight quarter dodging and kicking. She always gave nearly as well as she got, but this was a bit dire.

A bit? Ran snapped, her voice both as languid as a gently flowing stream and as sharp as her teeth.

Her tail swished behind us as a werewolf snarled and snapped at air.

Any ideas? I asked.

This is where I kill and you maim, she said.

I rolled my eyes. *We're not here to start a war.*

Tell that to them, she replied with a shake of her glorious mane that she made me oil weekly to make it shine.

Whelp. She has a point.

I grabbed a tiny bottle from my bodice.

NO!

But it was too late. I slammed the dirty bomb into the cobblestones in front of Ran's hooves, and from it erupted smoke that smelled of sewage and garlic and wolfsbane.

Ran released a neigh that was part squeal and part dragon growl.

You're going to pay for that, she whispered. My skin tingled as the blood left my face. She could be terrifying.

She darted through the smoke, using her body to shove the yipping and whining werewolves out of our way. I heard a sharp yelp and the crack of bone when her hoof kicked behind us.

I squinted my eyes to keep them from burning as I slashed with a knife at the werewolves with enough self-control to prowl at Ran's flanks. One yelped, a long gash dripping red blood from his shoulder, slashed by my blade. Then we were through the smoke and the alleyway opened before us.

One last werewolf stood between us and freedom. She was a white, glistening beauty with a black-tipped tail. I can admit something is pretty even if it's out to kill me, thanks. The snarling coming from her throat was loud enough to hear above the pounding of my heart and the sharp thuds of Ran's hooves. She crouched, waiting, ever patient.

JUMP! I shouted at Ran, giving her a visual to go with it.

Either Ran trusted me a heck of a lot more than I think—which was unlikely—or she knows this was the best plan we have and is too scared to pause.

This better work, grungy Two-Legs.

Ran's hooves hit the lean-to and one slipped. She almost flipped over backwards, but I threw my weight forward, righting us. A low neigh rumbled in her lungs and she used the lean-to as a springboard to leap to the one-story roof behind us. I grabbed fistfuls of mane and closed my eyes as the snarl of the white werewolf and the snap of teeth sounded from just beneath us.

That blasted rotten breath nearly took my tail, Ran grumbled.

Her hooves hit the roof, clicking over the moss and dirt wedged in the tiles of the slightly slanted, A-framed tavern. I could tell because loud, off-key singing rumbled through the planks beneath Ran's hooves. But Ran didn't pause long. Once she pranced a few steps, she leapt forward with enough momentum that she nearly dislodged me from her back.

RAN! I shouted.

No need to shout, Two-Legs. I'm right here. The smugness in her voice suggested she'd done that on purpose.

Idiotic, bloodthirsty—

Careful. It's a long way to the ground, she said.

I gulped and shut up.

My kidnapee moaned, his head thwacking against Ran's shoulder. I reached for the wolfsbane, but as soon as my fingers closed around the extra vials in my saddlebags, Ran leapt. I heard screaming and was unsure if it were the few people on the streets below or if it was me. My mouth closed with a clack of my teeth. The screaming stopped. *Nice.*

The vial was jostled from my fingers when we landed, and I released a curse Mom would cut my hair for.

Oops, Ran said.

Oops? What oop— I looked over and saw a horse barreling down the street at a breakneck gallop. His eyes were wild as all heck, and he looked as if he'd seen a dragon. Or a unicorn.

Oops indeed. And he was heading right for a bunch of late-night revelers who I knew didn't have a lick of sense left in their brains. Poppycock.

I tugged on Ran's halter—she wouldn't deign to wear a bit—and she glanced back at me with squinted eyes. *Really?*

YES, REALLY!

No need to yell, she grumbled, but she turned and leapt over an alley. I left my eyes open this time—had to in order to figure out a way down—and my soul nearly fled my body. I'd done a few daring things in my life, but we were currently three stories high with a long drop into the abyss of death.

Better not fall, then, Ran said, a twinkle in her eye when we landed on another roof.

You are enjoying this way too much, I hissed. *Aren't unicorns supposed to be afraid of heights?*

She flicked me in the back with her tail, simultaneously slapping the face of the werewolf who woke up just as we were in the air again. His face was staring down into the blackness from three stories up.

"Is this some sort of odd torture?" he asked, his voice laced with a hint of amusement. He grunted when we landed, his body wiggling a bit. His blood stained Ran's shoulder red.

We got just ahead of the horse frothing at the bit. The pathway down was looking… sketchy.

I don't think that's going to hold—RAN!

She released a tiny sound that was halfway between a grunt and a shrill scream and landed on an awning over a second-story balcony. The awning cracked and then gave. I screamed.

A piece of wood smacked the werewolf on the head. The metal balcony caught us, and Ran used it as a spring to leap below. Her

hind hoof clipped the metal balcony railing, but we made it. She tossed her head, coming to a stop inches from the drunk men.

One guy, a beefy dude with arms the size of Ran's hooves and black ink trailing up his arms, released a shrill scream.

His buddy looked up. There was something little and white and fluffy between them. I groaned. It was a puppy. A white puppy with eyes as wide as saucers and teeth bared in a snarl. What were two drunks doing with that?

They stole it, Ran hissed. The horse reared to a stop behind us, snorting and pawing, but Ran paid zero attention to the sweaty chestnut. Her attention was on the two men.

My kidnapee shifted to get a better look. "Is that—"

"Yep," I said.

I slipped from Ran's back. One of the men turned tail and ran. The other released his bladder with a hiss as he stared into Ran's dark eyes, glowing mane and bared, shark-like teeth. He fell to his knees. Yeah, she's terrifying.

I stepped around the dude and squatted down beside the puppy, whose hackles were raised as it snapped at my fingers. I grabbed it by the scruff, not in the mood to go chasing after the little thing. It might get itself killed.

It whimpered as I stood, but I cradled it in my arms, and it didn't attempt to bite me again. That was a positive sign.

The man who'd previously released his bladder now released a tiny sob. "Wait, please, they'll kill me—"

"They might. But would you prefer me to sic her on you?" I asked, bending down to his level as I jutted my chin as Ran.

He gulped and shook his head.

"Thought so."

A howl rose behind us, making my arm hairs stand at attention. Great.

I climbed back on Ran. This time, she was kind enough to stand still.

"You were harsh to them," the man on Ran's wither said.

I glanced down at him. Was that approval in his voice? His dark eyes found mine, and they were shining with humor and something

else I couldn't name. They were quite entrancing, all amber mixed with swirling gold hues, but this was a werewolf I was talking about. They were always entrancing while they hunted you to your death.

"Shut up," I hissed.

I kicked Ran, who grumbled about me asking next time instead of jabbing her sensitive flanks, and we ran. The werewolves chased us outside the city, where we eventually lost them in the wood.

"Where are we going?" the werewolf asked.

"Shut up."

"Unless you stab me again, I don't suppose you have anything to threaten me with to keep me quiet, yes?"

Being this close to him had ice rushing through my veins. What was I thinking? I'd always killed werewolves, not *kidnapped* them. "I'm only taking you to get to someone else. No harm will come to you if you do as I say."

"Says the one who stabbed me."

I winced. "I'm new to this, ok?"

"I can tell," he said, that hint of amusement back in his voice. "Who are you trying to draw out with this little charade?"

"None of your business. Now go to sleep."

"I am not a child to be put to bed. Could you give me a dose of wolfsbane? Sleep, even drugged sleep, is preferable to this."

"Is this conversation not pleasant enough for the mighty werewolf?"

I heard a snort that might've been a laugh or just a grunt from hanging over the back of Ran's bony wither. "It is entertaining, but the ride is quite exhausting. I would prefer to wake with a headache and sore muscles later than soar over rooftops and leap streams with a crazed assassin and her steed—is that a dratted unicorn?"

Dratted? Ran threw a slight crowhop that sent his head banging against her knee.

"Fine! A mighty fine unicorn with beautiful feathering along her hooves and strong, muscled flanks."

Ran's gait evened out. *Smooth,* she said, her voice holding a hint of appreciation.

"Shut up," I whispered, but of course the werewolf heard.

"Do you wish me to end this fine conversation? I believed you to be enjoying it, but it appears I was wrong?"

"I wasn't—Yes, please. Shut up."

"You are much too nice for a kidnapper."

"Thanks?"

I hadn't dosed the dude with wolfsbane again, mostly because he'd asked for it. Yes, I was petty like that.

And yes, that also made me an idiot. Who let a werewolf who'd tried to take your life multiple times and nearly succeeded *live*?

Me. That's who.

The moon and stars overhead lit my path, the silvery light filtering through the leafy canopy, and something in me uncoiled. Heck. I'd actually pulled that off.

Now if I just survived this coming night, I'd call it a win.

"Are you going to say where we are heading?" the werewolf asked nonchalantly, as if we were a couple taking a stroll through the market.

"Shut up." I was busy checking the little wolf over, letting my poor legs relax at Ran's sides since they were nearly shaking with the aftereffects of adrenaline and holding tight to a blasted unicorn who enjoyed throwing in a few crowhops over streams.

"Oh? Are you talking to *me* or your animal companion?"

I clenched my teeth. Something about him just got under my skin. A mountain loomed ahead, just a black outline where the stars disappeared.

The little wolf was fast asleep in my arms, his tiny feet kicking out in a dream. I smiled down at the small fellow, covering him with my cloak. I felt eyes on me and glanced over to find the werewolf staring at me and the pup with an undefinable look in his eyes. His neck would get a crick if he held that angle much longer. A scowl crossed my lips as I looked away.

That was when a tiny pop like a bubble came from the little pup and a scent like rotten meat reached my nose. I waved my hand to get the scent away from my nose.

"I believe I may barf," the werewolf said.

"Don't, unless you wish the unicorn to dump us both in an icy river."

He glanced up to find Ran craning her head around to stare at him. He nodded and swallowed hard.

After wading through dozens of rivers and hearing Ran complain about toting two rotten humans not even suitable for munching, we arrived at a cavern. The dark maw held a sense of timelessness, as if it had seen ages pass and the years had wizened it.

Great. I was thinking of caves as sentient. Missing a few nights' sleep was making me loopy.

I eased down from the saddle, my legs protesting. I rode often, sure, but not over miles of twisting, turning pathways, all while trying to keep a gentle hold on the pup and not slam my body against the werewolf lumped on Ran's wither.

Ran's pace picked up as we entered the cavern, her haggard body knowing rest was imminent. I didn't bother lighting a torch. It took a few turns for us to arrive at a cavern lit by what appeared to be starlight but was in fact a special purple and green glowing moss I'd cultivated for this purpose. Ran immediately plopped her head in the sweetly seasoned rabbit meat I'd specifically saved for her. While she dug in with her pointy teeth, I unstrapped the man from Ran's back.

I untied him and he dropped feet first. He landed and his legs gave, sending him sprawling on the floor. He lay there for a moment, his face ashen and expressionless.

It was creepy, as if he were a corpse.

I dropped and pressed my hand to his stomach, where blood still welled. A tiny groan escaped him, the first sign of pain I'd heard from him.

His body called to me, a sensation like a gentle breeze raising the hairs on my arms. *Rest and red meat.* He needed it along with something deeper. A need for anonymity. Which was weird. Most werewolves, especially nobles, were in control, not *being* controlled.

Then his needs cut off as if he'd erected a wall around them, making me raise a brow. Very few people had the mental fortitude to

cut their internal needs off from me, and most didn't because they didn't know I had a Gift.

He either cut himself off from the world all the time without realizing it or was paranoid. Perhaps both.

His hands were bound behind his back, but I knew he was still just as deadly. I jerked back as his legs swung up and nearly caught me in a headlock.

"I am *trying* to tend to your wound, you blasted stubborn fenbutt!"

He rolled over to his stomach, his face twisting in pain, and then hauled himself to his knees. I nearly whistled in appreciation of the will that move took when his stomach and detached ab muscles had to be screaming in agony.

"You likely just undid all the healing your body managed. Congrats."

His head was bowed to his chest, his dark hair hiding his face from me. "Leave me be," he hissed, a low growl rumbling in his chest.

I stumbled back, then tried to stand straight before he realized he'd actually *scared* me. Werewolves could sense fear. It made them excited to hunt and kill. And I didn't need this one getting any more deadly than he already was.

His head came up. His eyes met mine and my skin prickled with thousands of tingles as my body was overloaded with the suspense of being in the jaws of death.

His eyes held a hint of gold, but it was the darkness in them that stole my breath. A depth of nothingness, as if he didn't feel at all. I was staring into my end, and he knew I knew it. That was the worst part. His lips curved upward, as if in amusement. Those eyes rolled into the back of his head, and he face-planted on the ground.

It took me a few moments of breathing to realize I still *could* breathe.

Something I wasn't entirely certain would have happened if he hadn't passed out when he did.

I hoped Hood came sooner than later, because I think the roles had just reversed. The hunter had become the prey, and I did not

like feeling like prey.

CHAPTER 3

A Kidnapee

ALIA

The little wolf puppy was sleeping in a gentle nest of hay I kept around to take the edge off Ran's hunger if I otherwise didn't have meat. Would hate for her to take a bite out of me.

Ran rolled her eyes around to give me a look. I turned away to hide a slight smile and met the eyes of the werewolf. I tied the dude to a chair with a spelled rope, trying to figure out what to do now that I had him.

"How long do you plan for me to be here? I have a few appointments I need to attend tomorrow."

I shook my head. "Did the blood loss cause faulty memory? You've been kidnapped."

He shook his bound hands, raising an impervious eyebrow that made my nose itch with a hint of annoyance. "Oh, should I beg for mercy? Please don't hurt me, O brave and hearty captor. At least any more than you already have."

I winced. I'd dragged his body to a chair and tied him up before I stitched the wound in his stomach. The bloody gash was ugly from being left untended. Part of me hoped he'd die from infection so I wouldn't have to kill him.

"What are you doing kidnapping innocent men, anyway? You don't seem the type."

I placed a hand on my hip, shaking my head. I didn't need to answer his questions. But his voice was a bit dry, and I felt

sandpaper scratch across my soul, expressing his *need*. So I grabbed a canteen and placed it to his lips. He raised that eyebrow again. I sighed and rolled my eyes before I drank, just then realizing how thirsty I was. I drank over half the canteen, wiped my lips, and raised an eyebrow at him. His eyes were alight with humor even though his lips remained in a thin line. And this time, he drank.

He licked his lips, and then he grinned, showing white teeth. "Wolfsbane?" he asked. I grinned back to annoy him as much as his grin annoyed me. But it seemed to do the opposite as those eyes sparkled with a dark mischief that nearly caused my palms to sweat. He nodded. "Well played. It seems I'll be taking a nap. You plan to enact your plan soon?" His voice slurred. "And the pup. You'll protect him?"

I stared at him, but he was out before I formulated a response. Why was he worried about the wolf pup? There was something in his voice. Something nearly… pained. Sad, maybe? I didn't think he had those type of those emotions.

I set a hand on the dreaming little puppy. "I'll protect him," I promised to his snores, not entirely sure why I did such a thing.

Night came. I checked my stores and sharpened knives. It was a waiting game to see if Hood took the bait sitting behind me.

"Do kidnappers allow certain… needs to be met? It seems I have held my bladder admirably—"

Annoyance flared in my veins. The high of battle was slowly fading, leading to too many thoughts. What if Hood doesn't come? What if I'm not prepared? What if I fail?

No. I can't afford to. Not if I'm to take the place I've killed for.

I came over to him and put a silver collar on his neck, wincing at the smell of burning flesh and trying not to make it too tight. His breath smelled of smoke and peppermint, an odd mixture for a werewolf. I thought it would smell of rotten meat and death.

He snapped his teeth, and I had a dagger at his throat before he could blink. He leaned against the cold metal until it parted his skin and red blood pooled. I jerked the blade away. “Are you mad? You don’t have much more blood left to lose!” I said, waving my bloodied dagger at him.

“Not mad,” he said, his eyes boring into my skull as if trying to unravel a pesky knot. “There merely comes a time when death beckons with sweeter fingers than life.”

I stared at him. “Don’t you have something to live for?”

His chuckle was dark and tinged with bitterness. “I do not buy your little sweet girl act. We both know I am not leaving this place alive by your volition. Why do you ask such a question as if you care?”

I met his eyes. There was something in them… something that broke down the walls I’d put around what was left of my soul.

“You do not kill the unicorn, yet my kind deserves your wrath? I deserve to die, but many of my kind do not—and yet you slaughter them without impudence.”

“Who did you lose?” I asked at long last.

He blinked, as if the question surprised him. “My youngest brother. Slain by a Red. His skull was taken back as a trophy. Imagine finding your youngest sibling skinned like an animal. And you have to tell your sisters that he’s dead.”

“You are an animal,” I said, a hint of apology in my voice. What he said hits too close. I couldn’t feel for his species, not yet. I had to gain the heirship before I could change things.

And that meant sacrifice.

His eyes bore into mine. “Does that ease your conscience? Do you treat all animals with the wrath you treat us?”

“Only the magical ones.” Why was I entertaining this? His passion had me by the throat, and it wouldn’t let go.

“As if that absolves you of murder. Anything magical is evil—is that what you are taught? What gives you the right to be judge and executioner?”

I stared at him. What he threw at me were things I had thought myself but couldn’t...

I took out my blowgun, and he stared at me. “You know it’s not right. So why do you do it? I can smell it on you. The guilt. And yet I am still here—”

The dart sunk into his neck before he spoke another word. His eyes didn’t leave my eyes until his face tipped forward and his chin rested against his chest. I darted him again, just in case he was faking it.

He was getting under my skin.

He released his bladder in his sleep. I felt for him, but it was likely better than him being awake for the mortification.

Why was I worried about the werewolf who’d kill me at a moment’s notice? I shook the thoughts from my head.

Ran gnashed her teeth, drawing my eyes up to see the werewolf and her in a stare down. The werewolf looked away first, his brow lifting with dark humor to find me watching. “You are a curious creature,” he said, his eyes regarding me as if I were a puzzle knot to unravel.

I didn’t pause my sharpening, allowing the gentle cadence and sharp zings to soothe my nerves. “Do you not know it’s impolite to stare?”

“Do you not know it is impolite to stab and kidnap a person?” His voice was droll.

My lips twitched. We lapsed into silence, the zing of the blade and Ran munching on bones the only things to be heard.

The chair creaked as he leaned back. “Ransom is out. You do not seem the sort to kidnap for personal gain.”

I gave a noncommittal snort. “Such a good judge of character, eh?”

“You shan’t torture me for information.”

I wrinkled up my nose in distaste.

"Curious. You are quite the conundrum, are you not? Violence comes to you easily, and yet you don't wish to bring suffering. What is your purpose?"

"Are you an interrogator or a captive?" I asked, nearly chipping a blade with the next aggressive swipe of my sharpener. He's digging too deep.

"Are you a pawn in a greater game?"

I blinked at him. "Are we not all pawns in a greater game, Prince of Wolves?"

He hummed, and I couldn't tell if it was in approval or disappointment. "We are either pawns or we are not. As soon as you allow yourself to believe there is only one and no choice, there is no chance for change."

"Philosophical werewolf. Never thought I'd see the day. Now shut up."

He gave a mocking half-bow—nearly hiding the wince when it pulled at his wound—and closed his eyes, leaning back against the chair. If he kept prattling, he was gonna give me a greater headache on top of the one attempting to send a spike through my brain.

A low growl echoed in the silence, sending a jolt along my spine and making my hair bristle on my neck. My knife blade was along my forearm as I readied for attack.

But it was only the pup. He was swaying on his feet, his little eyes staring between the werewolf, the human, and the unicorn in the room. The little guy's ears were pinned back, the scruff on his neck standing on end.

I breathed out a tiny sigh and walked over to the pup.

"You're going to get yourself bit," the werewolf said with all the concern of a horned rabbit munching hay.

When I got close enough, the little wolf snapped his little fangs inches from my fingers. Well, poppycock.

I glared at the werewolf, whose face was blank. There was a twinkle in his dark eye that hinted at delight.

"It's alright, little one. You're safe," I whispered, reaching out once more. The pup whined, and I felt his need.

A grin turned my lips.

CHAPTER 4

The Red and The Wolfie

WOLFIE & ALIA

Wolfie

The grin transformed her. She was at once enigmatic and open, a curious blend of killer instincts and probing empath.

But that grin. It took her features and made her… stunning. She was not beautiful in the typical sense of the word for werewolves. Most mates met when they were in wolven form under the light of the full moon. Fated mates—were they even a thing—only occurred under the light of the Blood Moon which occurred once every three years. In all actuality, I am aware enough to say it is not entirely that I do not believe in fated mates—my sister met hers, after all. It is a sense of anguish which drives me to unbelief, for even were it a possibility, Source would not see fit to give me such a beloved creature. I am too dark for such a bond.

I have tasted evil and bathed in blood. It would be too much for a regular mate, much less one of the priceless, fated variety.

This little sprite before me—who saw fit to first kidnap me from the first of many celebrations of the upcoming Blood Moon—brings something else by her presence. My wolf was oddly tame around her. He was not one to permit such bondage, but by her hands, he was… content?

Which set me on edge. She stabbed me, for goodness sake. I had killed for less. But with my inner demon so tame, it caused a

sense of curiosity I knew I was better without. I just could not seem to curb the odd emotion.

I knew one of us would die. There was no way she would let me live, and there was no way I could let her continue to slaughter my kind.

Funny how a war can be so very bloody even when there is no battle.

With Lycus placated and serene, I could nearly relax for a moment in time. It was a heady sensation. He usually cried for the lifeblood of those who had wronged us. Even perceived slights had ended in a shift and bloodied jaws as Lycus asserted his dominance.

Not with her.

The moon was full, so he should be aching for freedom from our human form. Instead, he was content watching this little parasite. Even so, I knew that in a few hours, when the full moon would rise high in the sky, I would need to show my hand and take off the collar or else it would strangle me when my wolf was forced to shift.

The girl glanced up, her blue eyes sparkling as if with some inner joke, and she met my gaze. My wolf edged up, pricking his ears at her nearness, scenting the gentle hues of lilac and chamomile and sunshine and blood upon her. Her grin slowly faded as if she remembered where we were and what I was, and my heart gave a painful beat in my chest. I gritted my teeth.

Pull yourself together. It is not as if she were a damsel you can woo. She is a hunter of all magic, an enemy of my kind, and she has chained me to a chair as if I were common rabble.

As if you're complaining, Lycus, my wolf, said. *This is as good a vacation as we'll get. She stitched us up when you were about to bleed out.*

As if that would be enough to kill me, I replied.

Losing blood is considered an easy way to die, he said, snarky humor coating his voice.

I ignored him, my eyes followed the Red as she walked over to her unicorn—another oddity. I had never seen a Red ride a murderous grunt as that. From the unicorn, she stole a portion of meat.

The unicorn grumbled and showed her shark-like teeth, but otherwise did not protest. I rose a brow, unable to contain a hint of surprise.

Then the girl was before me, amusement in her eyes. "The little pup needs to be fed."

My eyebrow twitched. "Then give him the meat."

"He's been fed meat for a while, but he's still malnourished. He needs to be fed as a wolf, not as a common dog."

It took a moment for her words to penetrate. A languid blink shuttered the surprise I felt gathering in my eyes. Was she really asking what I thought she was asking? "Alas, I cannot. Such a thing is for she-wolves."

"Do you wish the pup to starve?" she asked, her big blue eyes blinking with pure innocence.

"You do it."

"Alas, I cannot," she said, mocking my accent. "I don't have the enzymes in my saliva to break down the meat in the way the pup needs."

A growl built low in my throat, but I swallowed it down. *She's enjoying watching you squirm,* Lycus said with a hint of admiration.

I do ***not*** *squirm,* I replied.

He snorted.

"I will not—"

"Should you do this, I'll take off the collar."

I paused with my mouth open. What?

"I will take off the collar," she said, spacing each word as if I were slow. But there was a hint of a lemony scent around her. The scent of fear.

Why would she offer something if she were so afraid? Did she not know the collar was the only thing keeping me from turning into a wolf and slaughtering her?

I struggled against squirming like a pup caught eating the chickens. Lycus chuckled. *This way you won't need to tip your hand too soon,* he rumbled with a bit of hope mixed with contemplation. We had dyed our fur to visit Niva and her pack to not tip away what I was, but that did not last beyond a shift.

What is it about her you are so keen to know? We should kill her sooner than later. You understand what is waiting upon our return.

More killing. More forced pain. We are free for a time, so let's enjoy this.

You know when we return we will be punished. There will be no more visits to this little vixen.

All the more reason to enjoy it now.

I sighed. "Fine. I will feed—" I choked off, attempting to tame my suddenly roiling stomach.

The kidnapper grinned. "Great!" She plopped the meat down in my lap. I looked at it as if it were feces a cat drug in.

"Are you not going to release me?" I asked, wiggling my hands behind me.

She snorted. "As if you haven't already untied and retied those knots. Free yourself, idiot."

A dark chuckle rumbled from my lips. She glanced up at the sound, her eyes widening and lips parting. A part of me wished to touch those lips, to see if they were as soft as they looked.

Down, boy, I whispered to Lycus.

Don't blame me for your faults, he replied with an imperious snort.

Dragon snot.

I untied the knots and attempted to take off the collar, but what I found at the end was not the usual knot. The silver diminished my strength, so I could not just break the chain. Hold up. It was spelled.

I glanced up at the girl, who had a smirk on her lips. Infuriating. Absolutely infuriating.

Then why are you smiling? Lycus asked.

His smile faded from his face. He looked as if I'd just taken his favorite toy away. "You cheated," he said.

I shook my head. "Nope. I just used every resource available."

"Reds are supposed to be killers of magic, correct? Are you such hypocrites as to use magic to kill magic?"

I didn't allow the pain to show. He asked a question that had long bothered me. I couldn't allow him to see he'd hit a nerve. "Feed the little one. He's hungry." The pup's need grew sharper.

The pup had been without nutrition for too long. His ribs could easily be felt beneath his thick coat and he stumbled as he walked. I glanced over as the puppy took a faltering step and his knees gave out. He collapsed into the dirt. My heart trembled as the need jabbed into the walls around my soul. He needed nutrients *now.* He was much closer to death than I would've given him credit for.

I had to free the werewolf.

The one who would kill me as soon as he was free.

"Promise me you'll feed the puppy," I hissed.

His eyes grew dark as he studied my face. He gave a single, succinct nod.

Fear tried to stay my hand. My fingers shook as I reached up. I had a blade in one hand, ready to stab his kidney.

As soon as the collar pulled free with a slurp, he spun quicker than he should've been able with the blood loss and wolfsbane. He grabbed my neck, his eyes boring into mine as if he could see past my walls and look on my very soul.

As I stared my death in the face, I wondered if I hadn't been searching for it, for the moment in time when everything would move me from this life to the next. To the end of the killing. To finally find succor from the guilt plaguing my steps.

But I wouldn't give in easily. I would go out kicking and screaming.

I pricked at his skin with my blade.

"It would take very little to kill you, Little Red, while another stab wound would not kill me—" He cut off as Ran put her horn against his back, right where she could easily pierce through ribs to drive directly into his heart.

His eyes widened. “You inspire such loyalty in a unicorn?” His voice twisted with disgust, and yet it also held a contemplation and curiosity that was likely bad for my health.

He squeezed my neck one last time, just enough for me to know he could’ve easily killed me, then he raised his hands.

I stepped back, swallowing through my bruised throat. “Feed him,” I commanded.

“Must I?” He clenched his fists over air where one of his knives used to be before I’d unarmed him. As he glanced over at the wolf, he moved that way as though without his permission. He dropped to a knee by the puppy, picking up the little one who whimpered.

“Still alive,” the werewolf whispered.

He grabbed the meat and chewed it, then gently pried open the pup’s mouth to set the meat within.

He rubbed the pup’s sides rigorously to get blood flowing and breathed in his nose. “Come now, do not give up,” he whispered.

I was entranced, watching this werewolf who had spoken to me with such scorn become suddenly soft.

The puppy chewed. I leaned back against the wall as my legs grew weak with relief. The werewolf continued his ministrations until the puppy gave another pitiful whine and at long last blinked open his eyes.

Did I imagine a sigh of relief from the werewolf?

The puppy sat up with a strength that bellied the poor lifeless thing he’d been a moment ago. He licked the werewolf’s chin. The werewolf set a hand on the pup’s head, a low chuckle escaping him. The sound held none of the dark humor from before. Instead it was a light sound, one of happiness and reprieve.

This man wanted to kill me. Would have, if not for Ran. Could I really be contemplating allowing him to live?

The pup took the meat from the adult werewolf as if he were his mom. Which was nothing short of comical.

Since the danger had passed, the werewolf’s squeamishness had returned. Every few bites, he’d gag, trying not to swallow the raw meat.

When he shot me a look of absolute pleading, and the pup was licking his chin in respect and near hero-worship, I bit my tongue to keep from laughing.

"Regurgitation is better for the pup," I said casually. From the corner of my eye came a flash of light. My hand jerked up, catching a… I blinked at it. "Did you throw a spoon at me?" I asked. Where did he get a freakin' spoon? Better yet, why didn't he kill me with it?

I was flirting with death by releasing him, but the little puppy was closer to death than I. He'd needed that nutrition, and I would not see such a young creature die, magic or no.

He turned his back and didn't reply as he went back to laboriously chewing. Before long, the pup was full, curling up at the werewolf's foot for a nap. His little paws twitched, and every now and again, the little guy would fart, the smell tickling the werewolf's nose and making him gag again.

He did an honorable job, but I believe regurgitation was beyond his sensibilities.

He wiped the back of his hand on his mouth, spitting out the rest of the meat. "Never do you speak of this to anyone," he whispered, his eyes flashing golden.

"Down, Wolfie. It wasn't so bad. It was… sweet."

His eyes grew wide as he choked on his own spit. I couldn't tell whether it was in pain at the thought or amusement. "No one has confused me with *sweet*." He snarled the word as if it were some sort of curse.

I studied his face. He had a scar across his eyebrow, which parted the black hair with a white gash. He had a shadow of dark hair along his chin and cheeks.

That powerful jaw was clenched. His lips were parted with a scar along his bottom lip, nearly cutting the lip in half. His nose was nearly pert but crooked, leading up to eyes the color of rich earth with flecks of gold, though they were soulless. Void of thought or intention.

It made me wonder all the more what he was hiding with such a mask. I knew that look well. I saw it in the mirror daily.

A noise drew my gaze to the front of my cave. Finally, some action. My dart gun was on my lips and aimed at the werewolf before he flinched. I blew hard. The tiny needle flew from the end, but he caught it, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger.

My eyes widened.

"Think you can leave me out of the action, hmm?" He flicked the dart back at me, hitting me in the forehead *with my own dart*.

I nearly rolled my eyes, but refrained, rubbing the spot on my forehead. "More like I didn't want you stabbing me in the kidney."

"Your kidneys are safe from my hand, m'lady."

I stared at him through slitted eyes. "I stabbed *and* kidnapped you."

"As if one could forget. Sharing that unicorn was a charming example of why carriages were created for transporting more than one individual. Especially when one is injured."

My eyes narrowed. "You're a werewolf."

He quirked a brow. "You have a fascinating obsession with stating the obvious."

"And you have a penchant for saying more words than are needed."

"You wound me. I will never recover." He clutched a hand to his chest and threw his head back, groaning with anguish.

"You're a werewolf."

"Shall I proclaim you the Obvious Olivia, darling?"

"Don't call me darling. You heal quickly," I replied in a brief explanation and then wondered why I was bothering to explain it to him at all.

He snorted a laugh. I blinked at the sound.

I blew another dart. This one hit his neck. He groaned. "Mother trained me to never be vulnerable."

I caught him as he fell—kinda. It was more of a mix between not getting smashed by the monster werewolf and not breaking his nose by letting him fall on it. "That seems a lonely way to live."

His half-lidded eyes showed an undefinable emotion as a sigh crossed his lips. "You have no idea," he whispered.

"I do," I replied in a low voice as his breath evened out. I set him on the ground. If the one infiltrating the cave was the one I was searching for, then I would never see this weird werewolf again.

I blinked quickly, shoving my emotions down. This werewolf had no need of my sympathies—he was a killer. No matter how sweet he might have seemed, they were all wild animals driven by rage and instinct. They were not human.

I turned, checking my blades. They released with quiet snicks.

"Watch them?" I asked Ran, nodding to the werewolf and the pup who was crawling up into the crook of the werewolf's elbow.

Ran snorted, going back to eating. That was as good as a yes.

CHAPTER 5

The Mystery

ALIA

I snuck through the passageways, blades in hand. My eyes adjusted to the dark; a glow was coming from around a corner that wasn't sunlight. Flickering lamplight preceded voices. They came around the corner, and I paused.

Hood worked alone.

Great. Whoever this was, it wasn't my target.

They stalked forward, silent, but not quite werewolf silent.

"You certain about this? They took it here?"

"Of course I'm sure. The tracking spell led us here, didn't it?"

"Quiet," hissed another.

I froze. That voice was familiar. I dropped to a crouch and stuck my nose around my little niche in the side of the cavern to look. He was wearing a long cloak which concealed well in the woods since it was a deep green mottled with gray and brown. It was a cloak I'd know anywhere because I wore one now. He was a Red. But I couldn't determine which one, only that the voice was familiar.

They were going down the wrong passageway. Eventually, they would have to branch back. That's the thing about tracking spells: they lead you to the target, but they couldn't tell you the best path to take. And if the target was in a maze, it could only tell you what direction the target was in, not guide you through the maze itself.

We were in a maze of tunnels that I knew like the back of Ran's head. I'd prepared this place for weeks. But now, the wrong enemy

had sprung my trap.

I quickly retraced my steps, going back to where the werewolf was snoring and the puppy was jumping and growling in his sleep. The pup had crawled even closer to the intimidating werewolf, his cute little nose resting on the werewolf's chest. It was adorable. If only it wasn't a werewolf who would've killed me in a heartbeat, I might have been able to appreciate the cuteness.

I changed from my Red cloak and cowl, quickly putting it in Ran's saddlebag. I donned a normal green cloak, adjusting it and using it to cover my brown hair. Then I rolled the werewolf to Ran.

Am I to be the pack mule of a stinking mutt again? she asked, drawing up her neck into an imperious arch.

"How dare I, I know. I'll pay later, but we need to get him out. Now," I hissed, looking back up the tunnel.

She clacked her teeth and pinned her ears, but laid down, allowing me to laboriously get the werewolf on her back. I put the puppy in one of her saddlebags. He didn't even twitch, he was just a little floppy weight in my arms. I gave him a quick kiss on his forehead before settling him in there with a blanket.

Ran grabbed my arm, her teeth gentle despite the flash in her eyes. "I know. You could dismember me in a moment. No need to remind me, you big hunk of muscle and killing intent," I said, kissing her soft, feathery nose.

She grumbled but released me, standing with the grace of an elephant. That was one thing she was not quite good at.

She turned and glared at me. Were it any other situation, I'd have laughed and goaded her to attack. But right then, we needed to get out of there.

Ran clopped out as I made my way behind her, keeping an ear out for the strangers behind us.

We reached the exit and stepped into sunshine. I glanced around, careful to watch for any movement.

I was about to mount when a snapping twig drew my attention. I spun, knives in front, just in time to see a man with buck teeth and arms of corded steel step out from beside the gaping entrance with

a crossbow. He grinned, hacking up phlegm as his fingers tightened on the trigger.

He was too close. It happened quickly. One moment, I was staring down death by crossbow. The next, I was enfolded in warmth with the scent of rain and knife oil mixed with lemons surrounding me.

A grunt and then my eyes cleared and I realized I was on the ground, laying on a… man? I glanced up, meeting deep brown eyes twisted in a slight grimace. Those eyes caught the sun sprinkling through the swaying boughs overhead. The sunlight made them gleam with an inner light, showing hints of gold and amber.

His breath teased the baby hairs on the top of my forehead. I realized my hands were splayed on his chest, and I felt his heart hammering beneath them. I was straddling the freakin' werewolf I'd kidnapped. And he hadn't snapped my neck. I shoved upright, spinning around and trying not to blush and wondering how the heck I was still alive.

But I wasn't about to risk death again.

The guy who tried to shoot me was working to reload the crossbow, but he was too slow. His eyes grew wide as I stalked him, twirling my blades and flashing white teeth from beneath my green hood.

The *need* of his alcohol poisoned liver brushed over my soul before I kicked his chest.

He stumbled back, staring me down with a sneer and swinging the crossbow like a mace. But the thing with crossbows is that they're extremely end-heavy. I merely stepped back and watched as the weighty end carried him in a complete circle that even his heavy frame couldn't stop. I grinned when he stumbled.

I kicked his knee, bringing him down to eye level, and clocked him in the temple with the hilt of my blade. He went down face-first with a crunch I hoped meant he broke his nose on impact.

I glanced back at the black-haired werewolf who was getting up and dusting himself off.

"I had it handled," I said, my voice sharper than intended.

He met my eyes, a tiny grin turning the corner of his lips. “Sure you did, princess.”

I clenched my teeth. “Sure thing, mutt.”

“Are we in an insult war?”

“Better a war of wits than of blood.”

He shrugged. “Fair enough, princess.”

I gritted my teeth, trying not to snap. There were three men still in that cave. We needed to go before they—

Too late, Ran hissed.

They erupted from the mouth of the cave. I hopped up on a snorting and pawing Ran, holding my hand out to Wolfie.

He studied me, his eyes seeing more than I wished. “You would give me access to your kidneys?”

I growled low in my throat. “Get your butt up here *now*!” I hissed.

He full out smiled, the cur. Then he grabbed my hand and swung up behind me. He kept his arms at his sides, giving a healthy amount of space between us. For being in a saddle made for a single person, he somehow touched me the least amount possible. Did I stink?

The back of my neck prickled with the knowledge of the master predator at my back, but there was no other way. At least none I’d choose. He’d saved my hide—I’d never say that to his face, but it was true—so there was no way I’d leave his sorry mutt butt behind to die. Even if it would be safer, I wasn’t without honor.

“You better hold on, Wolfie,” I said.

“Wha—” He cut off with a grunt as Ran lurched forward with her massive gait. Wolfie leaned forward, wrapping his arms around my waist, being extremely careful not to squeeze too hard. His touch was light as a feather, his breath brushing against my neck as my hood had flown off during our flight. His warmth wrapped around me. It felt weird. I didn’t let people get close, and yet I was breaking my rule to keep people at a distance. To trust no one. I’d only trusted Ran to guard my back for a very long time.

But here we were.

Ran gathered her legs, leaping over a log. We had long since lost any sounds coming from behind us. They likely had horses, but no horse on the planet could outpace a unicorn.

Darn straight, Ran said.

We slowed to a trot, coming to a winding stream. Ran's sides heaved, and I was feeling mighty cramped. I get what Wolfie was saying about carriages and whatnot. This saddle was not made for two, and although the warmth at my back was oddly not super uncomfortable, my thighs were aching and my legs were nearly asleep cause little blood flow could make it through the pinching confinement of the cantle.

Wolfie got down first, holding out a hand to me. I stared at him, but I couldn't get myself to take it. To accept help is painful. Either you hurt the other person or they expect something in return. Better to be self-reliant. I gave him a slight nod, but got down myself. He gave me a nod of understanding, going over to the river. My legs quivered when I hit the dirt, the tingling of blood flow made me grimace.

You should've accepted his help, Ran said *helpfully* as I tried not to fall on my butt by leaning against her shoulder that was still dark with Wolfie's blood.

Thanks. So much, I replied, slapping her shoulder teasingly and grimacing when the blood flaked off on my hand.

I turned, keeping my eye on the werewolf washing his hands in the river. His broad back and towering figure weren't quite as intimidating when he was crouched down, though I saw the tension in his shoulders, the way he was ready to pounce at any moment. It reminded me that he was still dangerous even if he didn't *look* dangerous. And that was perhaps even more terrifying.

I blinked. Then blinked again. But no, it was still there. White, goose-down fletching was sticking out from his back, the arrow broken at a ninety-degree angle where I guessed he'd rolled on it.

I sucked in a sharp breath. I shuffled over and grabbed his arm and then I sensed it. A vast need so deep it nearly consumed me. A begging, a wanting, a needing… Before I'd fully sensed it, he

shrugged me off, not taking his eyes from scanning the surroundings.

I swallowed, kneading my hand on one of my daggers. "Why?" I whispered, my mind begging the question I'd had ever since he rescued me—at cost to himself. He could have been free of me. He'd nearly killed me multiple times. I'd *stabbed* him, for goodness sake. And now this? It didn't make sense. None of it made sense.

He glanced over his shoulder, his eyes meeting mine. The mask fell for a split second, and beneath it was something I knew innately. Sorrow.

"I am a werewolf," he said, feeling around behind him for the arrow. He couldn't quite reach it and let out a frustrated grunt.

The arrow was close to his spine. A few inches more and he'd be paralyzed. I didn't know if a werewolf could heal from that. I'd never personally done such a thing. I just killed werewolves. I didn't try to scar them for life.

I huffed out a breath, about to ask what he meant, but his hand searching for the arrow was frustrating the heck out of me.

I touched his hand. "Let me."

He froze, his eyes tracking me from over his shoulder as I touched the splintered end of the arrow. My knife made quick work of notching the arrow closer to his skin to prevent further splinters. I snapped the arrow with a quick movement, the sharp sound making him flinch. I felt around the arrowhead, grimacing when my hands came away red. But then his soul opened once more, and I tried to push away the massive *need* screaming at me. I needed to find his other *need*, the lesser one—*there*. His body *needed* the arrow out so it could heal, but it also *needed* the poisonous wolfsbane out of its system and lots of liver and heart and water to resupply his blood from the stab wound. I grimaced again. It was my fault. He'd be home right now if not for me, and it was all for naught. I knew by now Hood wasn't coming.

I couldn't get the poison out of his system, but if I got the arrow out, he'd live.

"What made you do this?" I asked, standing and rummaging in my saddlebags.

"Do what exactly?"

I came back, sitting cross-legged behind him as I grabbed the shaft of the arrow.

"Are you purposefully obtuse?" I asked, biting my lip as I worked.

His eyes crinkled in a tiny smile that made the gold flakes twinkle in the darkness. "I am a werewolf," he said. I almost twisted the arrow inside him for stating the obvious again, but he continued. "I would survive. You are human. You would not."

"I was doing just fine without your help, cur," I said, minus the heat.

I waited until he released his breath and opened his mouth to reply before I pulled. The arrow ripped from his skin, and I immediately pressed the makeshift bandage to the hole. He didn't say a word, but his breathing did hitch. So, he felt pain after all. I was beginning to wonder.

"Of course you were fine. You were merely the brightest fish flopping around on the most pristine palace waiting for the cook to catch up."

I blinked at him. His eyes were dulled with a hint of pain, but they also danced with mischief. "At least I'm not a werewolf who let himself be kidnapped," I replied.

His brow rose. "Let myself? You were quite determined and prepared. A few guards will be punished—"

"Hey, don't punish the guys who were knocked out."

The brow rose further, the white hair in the center feathering into the dark edges. Were his eyebrows somehow flexible? "Do not punish the guards who did not do their jobs?"

Well, when he put it that way… My cheeks grew hot.

I took my hand away, and when I wiped the area, there was only a small amount of blood coming from the small hole. I could stitch it, but I didn't think he'd need that. He'd heal completely within a day. I coughed, backing away from his broad back. He rubbed his hands together and turned to face me. His eyes searched my face, as if looking for an answer he wasn't sure he wanted to find.

I needed to be rid of him and all the weird thoughts he was putting in my head. He was likely a manipulative dragon's fenbutt,

just like Grandma always told me. She was right, trusting anyone was dangerous. Especially werewolves.

But as I stared into his eyes, I saw something terrifying within those depths. Understanding. I didn't need to be understood. I was fine as I was. I just needed to kill Hood and take my place as heir apparent.

"The white werewolf with the black-tipped tail… you know, the one you were playing with before I…"

"Kidnapped me?"

"Yeah, that. She's sick."

He turned to stare at me, his eyes glowing golden for a split second as his lips pulled up to reveal lengthening fangs. "Did you poison her?"

There was a low growl in his voice that made me step back. Fear flushed cold through my veins as I remembered his vice-like grip around my neck. "No, nothing like that. I shouldn't have said anything—"

"But you did. Explain," he said, his voice a command which made my hand twitch to salute. Or grab a blade to defend myself. I clenched it behind my back.

"She needs help with her heart. A mage stone should take care of it, or hawthorn berry tea day and night for at least three months."

He stared without blinking. "How..."

"Please don't ask," I said, my voice dropping into a near whisper.

A low woof came from Ran's saddlebag. It broke me free of whatever awkward trance we'd gotten into and I went to free the pup. He licked my face and squirmed, nearly falling from my grasp. I chuckled, kissing the little guy on the forehead, happy to see him so spry. I set him on the ground. He tottered over to Wolfie, nearly falling on his face as his paws didn't want to keep up with his momentum.

"My target isn't coming. You're free to go."

I would've considered Shen being Hood because he oozed a killer's confidence that made my skin prickle, but I'd seen the Prince of Wolves in a parade when Hood killed the Twenty-Fourth Blade.

Wolfie paused in dusting off his jacket as if it were giving him something to do other than face the pup gamboling at his legs and licking his feet. “Care to repeat that?”

I stared at him. “You. Are. Free. To. Leave.”

His eyebrows furrowed, confusion gracing those otherwise dark eyes. “What?”

I threw my hands in the air. “Are you a few prickles short of a mulberry? Leave. Scat. Get out of here!”

“I am not a mule to be prodded to pasture,” he replied, sitting on a rock and throwing a leg over the other as if it were some throne.

I stared at him, my mouth open. “What are you doing?”

“Did you not say I am free?”

“Yes?”

“Good. Then I am staying.”

I choked on my spit. “No, you can’t!”

He raised a brow. “Oh?”

“I-I—” My brain scrambled for a reason. I thought he’d immediately jump for freedom, wanting to get rid of the pesky Red who’d kidnapped him. Or that he’d try to kill me. This? This is the last thing I expected.

“You are entertaining. I do believe I shall stay awhile. Besides, who will feed the pup should I leave?” We both glanced down at the pup, who was gnawing on a bone—where’d he find that?—beside a curled up and sleeping Ran. Yes, unicorns apparently sleep laying down and curled up like a cat. Odd, that.

I swallowed a hint of bile. He had a point. “Take the pup with you. I’ve no use for it.”

The pup paused his gnawing at my words, blinking up at me with soulful eyes. I tried to stop my heart from breaking at the hurt there, but gosh did it stab into my chest. It’d be better this way. I’d brought enough wild animals home, then released them. My parents wouldn’t allow another. Especially not a wolf pup who seethed of magic even if I wasn’t sure what he was.

“You—an assassin of magic—would let a werewolf and a magical creature of interest waltz out that metaphorical door without a second glance?”

I shrugged, pricking at a mole on my arm with the point of my blade. “You aren’t my objective.”

He leaned back, and I felt those hard eyes boring into me. “You are a strange creature, Red.”

“I’m nothing. Now please, leave,” I said at long last. I was tired, bone weary, and ready to go home and take a long nap. I’d have to reevaluate my plans and figure out another way to find Hood. My shoulders nearly slumped in disappointment, but I held them up through sheer force of will. Plans always had a way of falling through. It was how you dealt with it and grew that mattered.

“No.”

The one word broke through my haze of wishing for my bed. I blinked up at the werewolf still lounging on his stone throne. “Pardon?” I asked.

“I am staying here.”

“Fine. You stay. But I’m leaving.”

CHAPTER 6

A Tactical Retreat

ALIA

You're a flea-bitten, mangy squirrel, Ran grumbled, plodding away from the werewolf and pup.

Ran was still ill I'd woken her. But it was best to get out of there, give the werewolf a chance to escape with the pup. It would do my conscience some good to actually let something live for once.

But then I think of those he may kill. Those he likely *will* kill.

And I don't know if assuaging my conscience will only mean I'm responsible for more death. Grandma would have me flayed if I told her.

Ran's steps paused when a large bird fluttered overhead, pushing his wings to soar beyond the canopy above.

Ran's ears pricked. Her body stiffened beneath me, and she came to a stop, snorting. I set a hand on her shoulder. "What is it, girl?" I whispered.

Naked two-legs.

In other words, humans. Naked was her term for no fur.

"How many?"

She snorted again, stomping a foot. *Too many.*

Great. What the heck would a bunch of humans be out here for?

They smell of magic. Black magic. They are fanned out, searching.

I only knew one thing in these woods they'd be looking for. Well, two to be exact, but both were together.

Freakin’ awesome.

Black magic was not something to mess around with. It was paid for with blood. All magic had a blessing and a curse, both of which normally went to the user of said magic. It was its own system of checks and balances.

With blood magic, you could change that. You could make someone else bear the curse of the magic and even create magic where there was no curse for the user. It was an abomination and one thing I was all for eradicating.

We could sneak past them, leave the pup and the werewolf to escape. The werewolf was powerful. I was sure they’d be fine.

Don’t lie to yourself, Two-Legs. It’s unbecoming.

Great. My unicorn was calling me out.

“Then what do you suggest?” My mind had already been through the back and forth of whether or not to let the black mages take care of the little problems I’d released back into the wild.

She shook her mane, shooting me a side-eye. We both knew I wasn’t one to shirk danger. *What you’ve been thinking from the moment you knew there was a danger to those stinky mutts.*

There were many positives and negatives to having a unicorn so in tune with you that they know what you're gonna do even before you know what you're gonna do.

I snorted out a half-laugh and scratched beneath her mane. “Let’s go.”

She released a tiny nicker, which sounded somewhat between that of a bird’s twitter and a cat’s mewl, and whirled around. She changed her coat to blend with the green, and I laid low on her neck, pulling up my green hood to cover any hair escaping my braid as we dodged trees and leapt bushes. She slowed, picking her steps carefully to prevent snapping twigs. For being such a large creature, she was uncannily quiet and patient when making her way back from where we came from.

There was the rock the werewolf sat on with a few dark spots of dried blood and the flattened grass where Ran had slept.

Ran’s ears flicked. She carefully picked her way, avoiding branches and noisy leaves. Voices filtered through the whispering

leaves and the silence of the forest, as if it, too, felt the evil invading its peaceful boughs.

I hopped off Ran and made my way forward, crawling on my hands and knees to peek through the underbrush.

Ran came to an abrupt stop behind me, tossing her head. There were about twenty mages in a ring around the werewolf and pup. The werewolf held the pup in the crook of his arm. Behind the ring of mages was a cliff. A raging river lay far beneath the edge. The crash of water on rock and sand was a mighty roar surging up to meet our ears.

The black magic users poured from the tree line as if someone had called them. The men and women in cloaks had the regalia of a dragon head with an Ambrose bloom embalmed on their breasts. It was odd how they used a dragon head symbol when dragons abhorred black magic and avoided dabbling in other nations' disasters.

A figure stepped between the trees—the Red I had seen earlier, his hood turned inside out to display the dark red underside that gave my tribe the nickname we embraced.

A woman was beside him, her long blonde hair feathering in the breeze. Her back was turned to me. Her *need*... it was odd. She *needed* freedom. It was tainted with something I couldn't name. Something deep and dark.

Chills ran down my spine when I saw how Wolfie responded to her. His eyes grew wide with an emotion I didn't think him capable of.

Fear.

He tried to get through the mages to jump off the cliff, but with a single word, this woman stopped him. He froze mid-stride.

She said something further. He straightened, his eyes becoming voids of self, as if the person behind them was no longer there. A vast, broken *need* washed over me. I doubled over, my breath snatched from me when the force of the *need* hit my soul with the strength of a rampaging dragon. I clutched at my chest but kept my eyes on what was unfolding. The werewolf walked over to the Red as if he was a puppet, someone else propelling his legs forward.

I hissed through my teeth. Rage burned in my chest. I might hate the annoying cur of a werewolf enough to stab him, but no one deserved to have their will displaced no matter how bad of a being they were.

Run, Ran, I whispered to her mind.

I heard her coming—which meant she was coming *fast* to stop the idea growing in my brain. Her head emerged from the underbrush, her lips peeling up to show gleaming fangs of shark-like teeth. I jumped forward before she could stop me and drew a blade. Ran pitched a fit behind me, but knew better than to get caught by black mages.

"Kingpin needs the hellhoun—" The woman turned, her blue eyes widening as I barreled into her, slicing deep into her throat with my silver blade. I hoped it killed her, but it was unlikely. She was a powerful Alpha. To kill an Alpha, you had to decapitate them or stab them in the heart.

I didn't have time to look back as black magic burned my nostrils with the smell of rot. I tucked and dove forward, shooting an orb from my pipe that burst into large billows of smoke. A ball of flame from a mage singed the edges of my hood as I crashed into another's legs, who went down with a yelp. The smokescreen billowed around us, making it harder for the mages to narrow in on me.

I stabbed a mage's shoulder, ripped my dagger free, and ducked when my hair stood on end and an odd crackle echoed through the woods. A crackling bolt of white light zipped over my head and into a tree along the edge of the ravine, smoke curling from the wave of energy the lightning left in its wake. The tree cracked and gave way with a roar that would've been loud if not for the thunder from the mage's lightning making my ears ring.

A man grabbed me in a bear hug from behind, and a few of the other mages circled me.

I threw my head back and heard the satisfying crunch of his nose. He released me with a keening mew when I drove my elbow between his legs. I dove between the legs of a grasping mage who was all shadows in the smoke, slid under a ball of flame that went

over me to engulf another mage who was sneaking behind me, then I was free of the line of mages. Before me *should* be the Red and the werewolf as long as my sense of direction hadn't failed me.

Two shadowy forms emerged from the smoke. One with a hood and the other with glowing golden eyes.

The Red was reaching for the puppy, who whimpered and snarled, his eyes wild with fear. The werewolf behind him still held the blank-faced stare even though his eyes glowed with the scant light trying to pierce my smokescreen.

The Red accepted the puppy, but I was there.

For once in my life, I kicked the back of the Red's knee—idiot wasn't paying attention to what was going on behind him—snatched the pup up and barreled into the werewolf, hooking my leg behind his to send us both tumbling.

The puppy would survive; he was stronger than a human. Still, I cradled him to my chest as I went over the edge of the ravine, praying that the puppy and the werewolf would survive and that my family would be ok without me.

A smile turned my lips.

I went down with a fight. I just hoped finding my peace wouldn't hurt too badly.

CHAPTER 7

Rage

WOLFIE

My mind cleared. I knew the feeling well. Question was, what had I done when under Alpha command? No blood stuck to my fingers, no scent of death lay in the air.

A human-shaped, burgundy-hooded figure streaked between two dark magic users, tackling me around the waist. I grunted, glancing down to see a head of dark curls as the sweet scent of sunshine wrapped around me with a second scent that smelled of bitter herbs. I recognized it as resignation. I smelled it on myself often enough.

I felt weightless for a split second in time as everything paused while we hung, weightless, over the massive, raging river far beneath us. Then I was sucked into a vortex of air, hurtling toward the rapids.

I cradled the little warm and soft human with hard elbows and knife hilts to my chest. She smelled of sunshine and freedom.

My mind put disjointed images together. Mother coming forth with the black mages, using the last of her commands for the month to order me to surrender the pup and come home. Having put myself beholden to her long ago, she now had enough strength for three commands per month—and I could do nothing to stop it.

But I had not done as she said under her command. Why was my mind suddenly my own? I should be struggling to take the pup and give him to my Alpha, but instead, I wrapped my arms tightly

around the girl who had stabbed and kidnapped me and then sent us both over the edge of a ravine. She knew I would survive.

And she knew she would not.

That was the resignation.

Blasted humans and their blasted soft bodies. And blast this specific human for her self-sacrificing, idiotic ideas when she was supposed to *kill* me and put me out of my misery.

I would not let her find death before me if it was the last thing I did.

She deserved to pay for her sins, just as I did. And for that, she had to live. And sadly, so did I.

I glanced down, my body growing as I triggered a partial shift and used my weight to swap places with the human so I would hit first.

The water slapped against my back, and for a moment, I worried I had hit rock instead of water.

Then it engulfed us and sent us spinning in a rictus of up, down, and never out. My lungs screamed at me, and the human went limp in my arms. I cradled her, knowing that until this ride ended, I could do nothing except protect her from the worst of it. Rocks and sticks beat against me, then all went quiet as the river spat us out on a sandy shore.

Her body shivered constantly, her teeth chattering. I had to get her wet clothes off and dry them by the fire. If I had had my usual items for missions, it would have been easy to slip her into an extra set of my clothes, but I did not. A scowl pulled at my lips as I cursed myself for being so underprepared.

The white pup was still clutched in the human's arms. Even when unconscious, she had protected him. I eased him from her grip, and he came willingly with a tiny tail wag, even if it took more strength than I cared to acknowledge to pry him from her arms.

I shook my head and peeled off the wet clothing, careful not to touch her more than necessary. She trembled and flailed, but I would not have her dying on me just because she fought me even while unconscious.

My movements were jerky from anger and annoyance. Why did this idiotic Red have to come and do something so against her nature? She was an enemy of my kind. But she jumped off a cliff like some avenging being from Seventh sent to save my soul.

The more of her skin I revealed, the more my movements gentled even as fury flushed through my veins. Lycus pressed against me, fangs elongating and black hair tingling as it grew on my arms.

If I do not get these clothes off her, she may die, I said to him.

He retreated. It was marginal and the blanket of fur on my arms and the fangs remained, but we stopped shifting. That was a positive because it would have been hard to do what was needed with paws instead of hands.

But Lycus was not the only one enraged by what had been done to this innocent creature.

Before, I had been nearly certain that no Red could be innocent. A Red had broken into my house and killed my father. And I had attacked them in retaliation, though it did not bring back my father. Nor did it bring an ease to the sorrow which felt as if a fist had broken through my ribcage and squeezed my heart. No, that kill of an innocent had merely put me beholden to my Alpha.

And the anger at the Reds had pushed the guilt from my soul—until now. Until faced with a Red who was both guilty and innocent. A Red with more honor in her small body than in the entirety of most werewolf packs.

As I peeled the last of her clothing away, it took monumental effort of will to keep from shifting and finding the nearest elk to kill. To feel the warm blood beneath his neck and to take his life and let the scent of pain numb the emotions broiling within what was left of my soul.

This Red would call me a monster for such a thought, of that I had no doubt. But someone should become enraged on her behalf,

and I had a feeling this self-sacrificing idiot would not be the one to do so.

Her skin held numerous round marks that were reddish, upraised and mangled. I had seen such a thing before, but only with torture victims. They were burn marks made with precision to enact the most pain.

And she still had the ability to smile and rescue a deranged werewolf such as myself? I had locked those merciful parts of myself away, but this little ray of sunshine had endured a similar pain, and she chose not to allow it to make her dark but to use it. Where I had allowed the pain to make me a bitter, broken killer, she had taken it and turned into a shining example of honor in even the worst of circumstances.

And I wondered if she ever would have truly killed me.

The stab wound still burned with pain, especially since the stitches had torn and it was once more dribbling blood.

A smile turned my lips despite myself and the anger flushing my veins. She had stitched me up. That was not the act of someone who would murder. I doubt the little minx had even realized that she was never going to kill me. Likely not. She seemed to not want to show the part of her that was softer than the Red warrior she wore like armor.

As I finished peeling the chemise from her and gently lifted her head to get it off, my hands clenched in the fabric. I took some deep breaths before turning back to her to study the bruises along her torso and ensure nothing was life threatening.

There was no movement of broken bones when I pressed against the bruises, but it seemed she had hit more rocks and debris than I had wanted, regardless of how I'd tried to shield her from the worst of it.

There were also other things—a gash where the skin still had holes from where it had been stitched, a few bruises just fading with time, and much older scars that littered her body. A rope-like scar near her kidney I believe she had somehow stitched herself because it had healed less straight than the other scar on her shoulder. When

stitched unevenly, the skin healed with pockmarks and divots instead of the smoother scars done with an even hand.

The burn wounds were the most numerous. They had seared over even the small slices that were nothing more than a parting of skin—also a tactic of torture.

I knew the only thing she needed now was my body heat, but I could not bring myself to wrap her in my arms.

She was terrified of me—and for good reason. More than that, I wondered if there was something deeper. Another pain. Some other reason why touch terrified her worse than me attacking her with a knife.

And if so, my soul cracked, and emotions I had not felt in a very long time emerged from the buried depths of my mind. The urge to kill hit me with the force of a tsunami. But I had nothing to kill as I knew not who had done this.

I would find out. And when I did, not even Sixth could save them from my wrath.

Lycus would not be contained. He raged against the confines of my mind with such fervency it nearly caused me to throw myself into the nearest wall just to placate him.

That would not stop him, though. He needed to be unleashed. I gave in to his wish. The shift pulled at my skin and the still-healing bruises and where I suspected I had at least cracked my shin, if not broken it. But the ache was good. It chased away the rage until the red tinting my vision faded.

With a single shake of our woven body to get settled, Lycus padded over to the little Red who had saved us. She was curled up into a tight ball.

The Red's eyes opened, and she stared at us. We froze. But then I realized she was looking *through* us.

"Help them," she whispered. Her eyes closed again, and I realized she had not been fully awake, and yet she was begging me to save someone.

We licked her nose which she had twisted up. Lycus huffed out an amused breath when she wiggled it like a rabbit. He laid down

beside her as close as he could without startling her, and rested his head on his paws with his back to her.

Her shivering body trembled; she was so very small and vulnerable. Then she turned and, with a strength that belied her little body, wrapped her arms as far as she could around us.

Lycus did not dare move and held still as a mouse caught beneath a werecat.

Her shivering slowly abated and a gentle sigh escaped her lips. Our muscles slowly unclenched, and for the first time in a very long time, the aches of my body eased and my need to be around a pack of my own abated.

I would let her clothing dry and then put it back on her, hopefully before she woke. She would be none the wiser that any of this occurred.

CHAPTER 8

Common Goals Makes Allies

ALIA

I coughed, my lungs burning as if I'd snuffed ale. My mind was foggier than a dragon's nostrils, but I remembered warmth. I had been so cold, dreaming of death and black wolves, but then I was warm and I'd felt… safe.

When I tried to sit up, a hand gently pressed me back. Though I didn't have the energy to fight, my hand reached for a blade, but neither of them were there. My mind froze, my heart fluttering with panic. I could move my hands and wasn't tied, so I wasn't a captive, but where…

"Easy, Little Red," said a voice. I tried to open my eyes to see who was speaking, but they weren't listening. "You are safe."

A whimper met my ears before a wet nose bumped against my cheek and then a warm little body snuggled into the place where my neck met my collarbone. The panic subsided marginally.

My eyes finally pulled themselves open, and I blinked to clear my vision. "You?" I whispered, my lips dry and cracking.

"Me," he said, a slight smile crossing his face. He looked exhausted. He was covered in bruises and scrapes, but he was alive. And so was the pup.

I didn't know how to feel about that. I'd stabbed him and would've killed him happily in any other set of circumstances, but now here we were. I'd saved his life, and he'd saved mine.

I reached up a limp hand and placed it on the puppy's warm body, sighing with relief. But how was *I* alive?

"You should not have done that," he said at last, his eyes so serious and so... hurt?

"What? Save your freakin' butts?" I whisper-hissed, though it sounded more like a croak than anything else. Man, I was tired.

He lifted my head and I froze. My eyes tracked his face for emotions that would explain his motives. He could grow fingernails sharp enough to pierce my skull. Did he save me so he could torture me for information?

His eyes, although emotionless, held no ire. He tipped a canteen against my lips. I sipped, coughing most of it back up. His *need* was once more buried to where I couldn't feel it. A small mercy. "Sleep now, Little Red. I will watch over you."

"What if they find—"

"Shhh. They will not. I am here now. I understand your concerns, but you know I am skilled. I am aware you do not trust werewolves, but you can trust what I have done up to now. I did not escape when you told me to, did I?" he asked, his voice wry and gentle.

A tiny smile crossed my face. Thoughts of my family interrupted my joy. Would they be ok? Mom and Dad needed me. What day was it? How long had I been out? If my sister Anna had an episode without me there…

"I need to get home," I whispered with a cough that sent a flare of pain through my body. It took effort to hide my wince.

His thumb wiped away a tear I didn't even realize I'd shed, then rubbed my cheek in a way that felt almost soothing. "So much pain. I see you, little one. I understand. I will get you home as soon as possible. But now we must not move you. Your body needs rest. You can be the warrior tomorrow. For today, lay down your armor, be a human, and rest."

His words sounded nice. I wanted to do all of that, *be* all of that so badly. I just I didn't know how. Relaxing was worse because then I would feel. Panic tried to assail me. All while I was at his mercy. I felt his warmth at my side, felt his body looming above me, his

thumb still rubbing my cheek. I felt his power—and my weakness. It sent a coldness rushing through my veins, and my body trembled.

"Please don't hurt me," I whispered, my mind going back, finding… I shied from the thought, from the darkness lurking in the depths of my mind.

His thumb rubbing against my cheek froze. His hand trembled. "Who hurt you, little one?" he whispered, his voice gentle but with steel lacing every word as his thumb retreated from my face. He wasn't looming over me any longer, and I breathed a little easier. My body didn't have the strength to remain awake. I fell into restless dreams of grasping hands, knives piercing skin, brands that burned, and darkness.

I WOKE WITH A START. My mind was spinning, my eyes wide but vision blurry, and my knives were still nowhere to be found. I sat up, trying to determine what had frightened me when I saw a little puppy barking at the werewolf.

Wolfie's eyes were on me, his brow furrowed and his eyes appearing apologetic. "Forgive us, we were trying to be quiet," he said, staring down at the pup with his lips twisted in a mock scowl.

The pup nipped at his fingers, growling and play-snapping. The werewolf's shoulders slumped. "Fine." He grabbed the stick at the pup's feet and threw it into… Is that a cave?

I glanced around me at walls of stone and shimmering rock where firelight bounced and danced. A gentle tap of water somewhere along this cavern was at odds with the crackle of the fire in front of me. My cloak was thrown over me, and I brought it up to my chin, trying not to shiver as my body ached with cold.

"Sorry for waking you," Wolfie said.

"What can I call you? It seems odd to keep calling you Wolfie in my mind," I said at last. He hadn't killed me nor tortured me. I still couldn't trust him, but we were kinda allies trying to protect the

puppy. I suppose the old adage of *a common goal makes friends* was right after all.

His lips flicked upward in a hint of a smile. “Call me Shen. Do you have a name I may call you?”

“Alia.”

“Well met, miss Alia. It seems we are stuck together for the foreseeable future. How can I help it be more pleasant for you?”

I blinked at him. “Umm… what?”

He closed his eyes as if searching for words. “You do not like to be touched, and yet you need it at times. Is there anything further I can assist with to keep you more comfortable?”

I stared at him, my jaw dropping open. He… how did he… “How do you know that?”

His smile was laced with sadness. “The way you flinch from touch, yet when you know it is coming, you may prepare for it. Is there something else you need to remain calm?”

I stared at him, trying to understand his angle in all this. Where was the animalistic werewolf? Where was the killing beast? Where was the monster who tried to kill me many times over? Did he forget I’d stabbed him?

I had to get away. Against my better judgment that said there was an ulterior motive at play, something in me was relaxing at his understanding. “My knives,” I whispered.

He nodded, going along the walls to where my knives were laid out in a row. He tested the edges before placing them back in their sheaths one by one. Something about that… Did he sharpen my blades for me?

He crouched and handed them plus a canteen to me, his eyes searching my face. “What else?” he asked.

I grabbed a blade from the pile and tested it against my skin. My skin parted easily, and I grinned. “You sharpened silver blades?” I asked, grinning up at him.

He shook his head, his lips twitching. “They were already sharp. Just wished to ensure they remained so in case you needed to stab me again.”

I blinked up at him, mouth gaping. Was that a joke?

This werewolf went against everything I knew about shifters. I awkwardly fiddled with my blades, pulling them in and out of their sheaths to make sure they came out smoothly despite him just checking. “Thanks,” I said, not able to look at him. I’d killed his kind. Stabbed him. Why was he so nice to me? What did he want from me? ‘Cause that’s something I’ve learned in life: everyone always wants something from someone they do something nice for.

“You’re welcome.”

“Why are you doing this?” I asked at last, staring up at him. At those unreadable eyes and the imperial black eyebrow with the white streak that lifted when faced with amusement or curiosity as it did now.

“You save my butt and ask such a thing?” His voice sounded weird saying such a word in his posh accent.

I relaxed a bit. Ok, he’s repaying a debt. That made sense. I saved—well, I didn’t really save him; I just stopped him from doing something terrible, maybe? “Who was that woman?” I asked.

His hooded eyes darkened and then glowed with the light of his wolf. “My Alpha,” he bit out.

I nearly rolled my eyes, but refrained. “If I couldn’t deduce such a thing, I’d be a rabbit in a burrow without a head.”

He flicked my nose. My reflexes were dampened, so I didn’t get a blade halfway out of its sheath before he’d pulled back. I wiggled my nose, staring up at him. What the heck?

“You wiggle your nose like a rabbit. But you will not be losing a head on my watch,” he promised.

I huffed out a breath, crossed my arms, and stared at him.

“If you were a werewolf, such a look would be seen as a challenge,” he said, nearly nonchalantly, holding my gaze with his emotionless dark eyes that still sent a zing of cold warning through me.

I lifted my chin. “And if I mean it as such?”

A tiny, dark chuckle erupted from him. “We will spar when you are well, Little Red. Until then, you will rest.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” I hissed, scowling at him.

His eyes flashed with his wolf, but he looked away and ran a hand through his shaggy hair. He glanced back, his eyes still rimmed in gold. "You do not know when to rest, do you?"

My scowl deepened. How *dare* he! "I'm *fine*."

"Are you?" he asked, challenging *me* with a stare this time.

"Yes," I said. I wouldn't show weakness. I drew a blade in case he decided my challenge should be met with claws.

His lips twitched. "You would be a fine werewolf."

I blinked, trying to figure out what he meant and if it was a compliment or if I should be offended, and I realized my nose wiggled. My nose *wiggles*? Now he's made me subconscious about my *nose*. Wonderful. "Was that a compliment?" I asked at last.

"Take it as you will."

I wrinkled my nose, then smoothed it out. Apparently, my nose moved much more than I thought. "You distracted me."

"Did I?" He glanced up from where he was turning something over the fire.

"You are—"

"A cur?" he asked, his lips twitching and eyebrow raising.

"Nope. An incorrigible idiot."

The way he smiled and his eyes sparkled with amusement just then made him seem human. "Thank you."

"Infuriating incorrigible idiot of a cur," I muttered.

"Glad to be of service."

"Why are you like this?"

His brow furrowed. "Pardon?"

"You—you—you're being a *kind* werewolf."

"Excuse me, was that a compliment?"

"Nope. It's infuriating."

"Ahhh. So your brainwashed mind is having trouble understanding that werewolves can be somewhat *kind*, correct?"

I gritted my teeth. How could he so nonchalantly pinpoint the echoes of my soul? "You've returned the favor, done your duty, whatever. Your debt is paid. I'll just go home, you go home, and we can forget all about this."

"I should be offended you think so low of my kind, but some of us are, in fact, exactly as you think. And I have a feeling you have encountered more of the rotten-to-the-core murderers who have given themselves to their animalistic sides than those who are peaceful, yes?"

I think of the rabid werewolf we put down last month. He had taken to hunting children in the woods outside of the city. The scent of ten dead children decomposing still haunted my nightmares and my soul. Shen nodded, as if my face had given away my thoughts. I clenched my fists. I had to stop giving him that edge when I could read nothing on him.

"If you're so good, why not stop those who are evil?"

His eyes shuttered, malice filtering into that look. Fear traced an icy path up my spine, causing the hairs on my neck to stand on end. I was reminded of all the times he'd nearly killed me in that single look, of all the times I was prey and he was hunter. "I am not good, little one. I am merely one who will not harm you."

"Why? Because you can't?" I quipped, trying to lighten the mood, but he shook his head.

"Because the only one who can protect you from me is myself, and I will die before I harm you."

I saw the animal hiding in the depths of his eyes—one which hungered for blood and freedom—and I realized then and there that this man wasn't good. But he wasn't evil, either. He had bathed in darkness and came out a monster. Yet he didn't allow that creature to harm others.

His self-control was what protected me. And while a part of me was terrified, another part was exhilarated. As if I were jumping off a cliff. And trust me, I knew exactly how that felt.

"Why? Why the change in wanting to kill me? Just yesterday we were enemies. And today—" I didn't know what to call us, but it wasn't enemies. Nor was it friends.

He stared at me as if he were just as lost on what to call this as I was. He clenched his fists and turned away. "Because that is my freedom, Little Red. You mean me no harm any longer. You went so far as to free me to save a wolf pup, and I can choose not to harm

those who cross my paths in these times. So I will not." The last words came out a low growl, echoing in the cavern.

His *need* pulsed, craving freedom and taking it wherever he could. He could have chosen to hurt others as a form of control over his life. Instead, he took his power by controlling himself and the circumstances he could hold. He chose honor over himself.

Never before did I think I would actually respect a werewolf.

Yet here I was.

Again, his *need* washed over me, and I felt another, secondary *need*. One to be around a pack, to be close to another soul. I dug deeper, trying to determine the meaning. A *hug*? This big bad werewolf needed a hug?

Whelp at this point, why not?

I jolted forward. He stepped back, eyeing me as if I were a kitten about to bite his toe, and he actually jumped when I wrapped my arms around his waist. It was awkward as heck.

CHAPTER 9

Scent of Freedom

SHEN & ALIA

Shen

The smell. Originally, I thought it was sunshine and freedom mixed with lavender, but not any longer. Beneath it was a hint of something which reminded me of a memory I had long since suppressed. A happy memory, one where I was… free.

Papa grinned down at me. I had just completed my first shift, my gangly legs tripping me until I landed on my nose. Papa bent down, ruffling the fur on my head.

"A mighty fine werewolf you'll be, little one. Black as night and just as swift."

I lapped at his face with my tongue, my tail slapping against my flank. He picked me up, his arms strong and warm. A smell erupted from the mix of our joining.

No one realizes that when two scents come together in companionship, the individual scents change. It is slight but noticeably perceptible to a werewolf's nose. And that change is what I scented on this little Red. She smelled of the sweet change one has upon meeting someone new who was meant to be in your life. It was gentle, easily overlooked, but there all the same.

She was stiff as a board, but the wolf inside me soaked in her touch. Werewolves crave close contact with their packs. Many times

you will find piles of werewolves in safe havens and in pack houses, either in their wolven or human forms.

Yet I was often feared in the circles I traveled. No one dared get close enough to me in order for my werewolf to be sated. And this little one who was so frightened of physical touch and of me somehow *knew*.

I kept my hands at my sides. She was uncomfortable, and I would not add to that. But I also could not deny the uncoiling inside my soul as my wolf purred.

Alia jumped slightly, staring at my chest with wide eyes.

"It is alright. Werewolves purr when we are content," I whispered, my voice choked with vulnerability. I was uneasy, and yet, I could not find it in me to move. If someone was close enough to hug me, it was because I wanted them there so I could spill their lifeblood. Not so with her. She was there because I needed her. Needed the gentle touch of another soul.

And I did not know what to make of that. It made me feel vulnerable in a way I could not allow. Even so, I did not move.

Relax and enjoy it, idiot, Lycus muttered, sounding nearly cathartic. Or drunk.

Sure. Relax around the assassin of my kind who should be trying to kill me but is instead slaying me with kindness.

But as her deep blue eyes stared up at me in confusion, I realized I was frozen a mite too long.

"Thank you," I said.

She backed away with a curt nod, pushing dark hair matted with her blood behind her ear. She shivered, wrapping her arms around herself.

The area above my heart ached. "Come, sit by the fire. I will add more wood."

She nodded, grabbing her knives and strapping them around her waist.

"Your stitches need to be checked," she said.

I stared down at her as she patted the rock beside the fire.

She glanced up, and a tiny hint of mirth crinkled her eyes. "Are you scared I'll stab you again?"

I huffed out a breath and sat. My muscles were clenched; I was indeed scared of her. But not in the physical sense.

She remembered my wound.

"May I?" she asked.

I nodded, easing up my tunic and twisting it aside so she could see the wound. She bit her bottom lip between her teeth as she scooted closer, her hair frazzled and tickling the bottom of my chin. I resisted the urge to scratch and held still.

She hummed, her fingers gentle even as she drew a tiny grunt from my lips with her prodding.

"Sorry," she said, glancing up at me. Her eyes caught mine for a moment, and it was as if she remembered who she was speaking with. Her fingers shook and she quickly looked away. Her eyes darted to my fingers hanging languid at my sides, and she swallowed. The bruise shaped like fingers on her ivory neck caused my chest to clench.

She pushed through the fear wafting from her to continue to tend the wound. "It's healing well—" She paused, her eyes drifting further up my side where the hint of an old burn showed beneath where I held the tunic.

I quickly dropped it as her eyes widened. She pushed my tunic back up to see the entirety of the burn. She swallowed hard, tracing the edges of the raised and mottled flesh which was twice the size of her hands.

Emotions I had no name for burned in my chest as I pressed down the shivers her gentle touch tried to elicit. I did not know whether I wished to run from or embrace her touch, so I did neither. I merely sat there and watched her as she traced other wounds, but none so large as the burn.

Werewolves healed without scarring unless the wound was made with silver. By the horror in her eyes, I would say she knew that.

"What happened?" she whispered, her voice choked with empathy.

And when she glanced up, her eyes were filled with an emotion I had not seen in a long time. Understanding.

"It was a long time ago," I said, trying to press down the emotions broiling in me.

"Some of this seems recent," she said, leaning closer and nearly touching an upraised scab from a recent assassination. Every soul I took was tallied on my skin, but she need not know that.

She wrenched her hand back, as if realizing what she was doing. She pulled a knife from its sheath and brought it to my stomach. It would take but a twist of her wrist to disembowel me, but I held still. Maybe she would put me out of my misery. Instead, she merely used the edge to cut the rest of the stitches and pull them out one by one.

"Alia," I whispered, unsure what to say or what to do.

She jerked upright when a low howl echoed down the dark corridors of the cavern.

"Where's the puppy?" she asked, staring in the direction where the pup had disappeared.

I glanced down the passageway. He should have been back by now.

"Stay here," I said standing up and walking in the direction of the howl.

"By a dragon's butt, ya ain't leaving me behind."

I raised a brow and crossed my arms, leaning against the wall since my legs were still weak from whatever this little thing had done to me. "You're weakened."

She drew a blade, and before I moved, I felt a light tug and then a part of my cloak was attached to the solid stone wall behind me. I chuckled, pulling the blade from the wall. The thing was buried deep. It took a momentary struggle to pull it out. Not that I ever wanted her to know such a battle between the knife and I occurred.

When I turned back around, I felt her. Smelled her. She stared up at me, her eyes flashing with challenge, and she had a blade casually resting at the divot of my neck.

"Weakened?" she said, her voice just as sassy as her gaze.

It made my lips twitch. Feisty, this one. "Forgive me, I did not mean offense—" The flat of the blade dug into my neck.

"If the next words out of your mouth are not conceding that I am, in fact, not weakened, there will be trouble," she mewed like a cute kitten.

"Down, girl."

"Did you just tell me to—"

"Calm down?" The next moment, I was on my knees and she was behind me, her arm around my throat. Her bicep squeezed and black spots danced in my vision. I would never tell her I was impressed. She was skilled.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you to not tell a girl to *calm down*?"

I stiffened. "The only thing my mother ever taught me was to obey," I whispered.

She released me, coming around to see my face. Her eyes softened. "Where did you get your manners?"

"My father," I said. And it was true. Papa taught me what it meant to be a man. Mother taught me what I never wished to be.

"You turned out. Now let's go."

"What about that trouble you mentioned earlier?" I asked, enjoyment in my soul as I poked the bear. That nearly caused me to miss a step. I did not feel amusement. But here we were.

She held up a knife. It was a tiny stiletto with a swirling blade made of different metals giving it a dark and light swirl. Hold up. That was *my* blade.

"You little minx," I said to her back, walking quicker to catch up.

She was infuriating.

Then why are you smiling? Lycus asked. I wiped the grin from my face before the little human saw it.

Alia

HIS BLADE WAS NICELY BALANCED. Granted, as a stiletto, most of the weight was in the center and therefore wasn't great as a throwing blade, which I preferred as it held weight in the blade itself. It was still a well-made murder device. I liked it. I'd keep it. Petty, perhaps, but he deserved it.

I couldn't get the feel of his warmth out of my head. He didn't hug me. Didn't take advantage of what I was offering. Didn't even try for more. Or try to kill me when he could've easily snapped my spine. Instead, he'd merely held still until I moved, but I felt his body relax minutely, felt his muscles ease. I released him when I felt the need inside him retreat. He would need contact again soon, but I hoped he would be back with his own kind before that happened. I'm not sure I'd survive another hug like that.

And then there were the scars. I'd stared up at him and saw empathy there. We both knew the pain of burns and how they scarred both the body and the soul. Did someone close to him make that burn? Did he, too, feel the pain of betrayal cloaked in a wish to make that person proud?

My soul ached when I glanced up and saw again the vulnerability in his eyes and the broken soul he tried to hide.

You are sky high and don't even realize it.

The voice made me grin. She was back and that meant she was safe and away from the black mages. But what the heck was she talking about?

Boy and girl meet, girl likes boy, boy likes—

WHOAHH! Nope, nope and nada. He's a freakin' werewolf, you prick.

He's also a man.

You are delusional.

You are obtuse, she said.

Thanks. I try.

You'll see, Two-Legs. You'll see.

"Nope, I won't," I muttered, but forgot about the werewolf hearing thing.

"What was that?" mister werewolf himself said.

"Nothing," I grumbled.

He turned to look at me, but said nothing else.

A low growl echoed around the corner.

"Stay here," Shen ordered.

"By the dragon's maw, you don't learn, do you?"

He turned to stare at me, his eyes glowing in the scant light of the torch he held before him, likely for my benefit, as I knew he could see even in this darkness. "I was not asking." His calm voice sent a chill up my spine. It would've been worse if he'd yelled.

I crossed my arms, even as my legs threatened to give beneath me. A cough tried to escape the back of my throat, but I swallowed it back. "What are ya gonna do, make me?"

His eyes flashed with a darkness. His grin showed teeth beginning to morph into fangs. "Try me," he whispered.

"High-handed, infuriating—"

"Cur, I know. Please?"

I blinked. I didn't know that word could be a part of such a blood-thirsty creature's vocabulary. But still. The pup had wiggled his way into my heart. I'd already thought of a name for the little guy. I wouldn't put his safety in someone else's hands.

When I stared back at Shen with the look he said was a challenge to werewolves, he growled. Honest to goodness. I about jumped out of my skin. Something in me *knew* not to poke the werewolf, but I wasn't about to run. "Down, Wolfie."

He stared at me, not blinking, his brows furrowing. "What did you just say?" His voice was slightly slurred because of his partially shifted teeth.

My brain was already overloaded with fear, so everything was the calm I get right before battle, which meant nothing in my mind worked properly. I might've also been a bit foggy-headed and I felt drunk, so that might explain my next action.

I patted his chest. He stared down at my hand as if it were a snake about to bite him. I stared at my hand as if it were a snake about to get cut off because it touched a werewolf who was already partially shifted, which meant his bloodthirsty side was closer to the surface and likely harder to control.

I tried to put my hand at my side, but then I was hyper aware of my arms and they felt weird, so I just crossed them. There. Now then. I glanced back up at him, only to find there was something on his face akin to shock. "You might scare others, but you're just a big teddy bear, aren't you?" I asked. Then I cursed my dratted mouth for speaking every single thought aloud.

He cleared his throat, looking anywhere but me. "The longer we stand here arguing, the more chance the pup is in danger."

"Then let's go," I said, pushing past him. He could've stopped me, but instead he allowed me to push him aside. He growled again, which made me smile. I think my fear receptors were getting faulty. Could I replace them? Then he was right behind me, handing me the torch. "Will you at least let me go first?" he said at last.

I shrugged and paused, allowing him to pass. He nearly scraped his head on the wall to avoid touching me. He gave me a curt nod and then I was following his broad, tense back.

Another growl erupted from the puppy up ahead, and Shen sped up. My breath was coming in ragged gasps, but a stupid thing like sickness wouldn't stop me.

Shen stopped. Just beyond him, light was glowing from around a craggy corner. He smothered the torch with his cloak—Was that a heat-resistant material? I wanted one of those!—and paused before slinking around the corner without a sound. It was freaky how silently he moved.

CHAPTER 10

The Nymph

SHEN & ALIA

Shen

The absence of blood and pain was a positive. Most people did not realize pain had a scent. It was sharp and nearly heady to the nose of a werewolf. It could become intoxicating. Many a shifter had fallen prey to his werewolf side and the scent of pain. It was a gruesome master, and something many werewolves sought as a drug to numb their pain. Father had taught me never to allow myself to become immune to the pain of others. Which is why every death is tallied on my chest. Their pain became my pain so I would never forget their lives mattered.

When I stepped beyond the edge of the tunnels we were traversing and into a small, cavernous space, I froze. Alia was muttering behind me in the dark about inconsiderate werewolves. She was the one who wanted to come along. I would not coddle her.

When she rammed into my back, a small grin passed my lips. She muttered something not very nice, but I slowly stepped aside and let her see what was in the cavern in front of us.

A large body of water stretched from one corner of the cavern to the other. The cavern itself was the size of a noble's home. It was lit with a soft, silver glow of gleaming moon rocks all along the shore and descending into the depths of the water itself. The water was a

crystalline blue so clear you could see straight to the bottom of the shallow areas.

On the shore, the pup was playing with two adolescent nymphs. Nymphs were shy, peaceful creatures. They were nearly hunted to extinction for their ability to grant a single favor. Nymphs were in tune with the Source of the world. Source was much like an extension of the King, a way for him to show his favor on the world.

Nymphs were one of the few creatures so in tune with Source they could nearly forestall death. Should one grant a favor, you could use it for nearly anything. Heal your mother, kill an enemy without touching them—the world would be at your fingertips.

The creatures of the world had darkened this Gift, however, believing should they kill a nymph, the creature's power would be theirs. However, rather than granting favors or putting a nymph at their mercy, this murder of nymphs created the very thing that could destroy the peace all creatures strove for. It created dark magic, sometimes known as Tenabra—the antithesis of Source.

When humans and magical creatures began using Tenabra, it grew in both strength and temptation, drawing more to its dark paths. You could learn it. It was something everyone could steal. And it all began with the death of the nymph queen five hundred years prior by the leader of the dark mages, Kingpin, a being made immortal by the blood he spilled to siphon life energy from Source itself.

My mind returned to the pup. His mock growl was low and fierce as he pounced on the smaller of the two nymphs. The nymphs were vaguely humanoid with long, willowy arms and hair which floated in the air as if the creatures were in water. They had sharp features and eyes of pure cerulean, no pupil or sclera. Their bodies were draped in seaweed to make a form of a robe. The smaller one's seaweed was a bright orange, while the other was a softer blue, the color of Alia's irises.

Since when do you think in terms of comparison to her? Lycus' voice was not even pointed, just curious with a side dash of knowing, but fireshat did it annoy me.

I ignored him.

But if there were adolescent nymphs around, where were the…

A rush of water precluded a small swirl of water. The swirl had a tinge of blue beyond the blue of our world. It glowed similarly to bioluminescent moss, but with a hue I could not quite define. It was as if I had never beheld blue, as if the colors that had once before seemed blue were merely faux imitations of what it was supposed to be. The whirlpool grew, encompassing the entire center of the water.

That was when the being appeared.

Alia

My lungs didn't wish to fully accept air. It seemed they were still angry at me for the little impromptu swim I put them through.

You dove over a cliff. You deserve whatever discomfort comes, said my very unconcerned conscience—AKA Ran.

I ignored her as I focused on whatever the heck was happening in the water. The whirlpool was strangely serene yet chaos incarnate. There was gentleness there, as was power which could sweep you to your death.

But the *need*. The *need* drove me forward. For it was one I had felt one too many times.

"Come, we mean you no harm," I said, kneeling at the edge of the pool.

A hand tried to reel me back, but I held firm.

"Come, Alia, we should go," Shen said, tugging on my arm.

"Nope. I'm staying. You may leave if you'd like."

"Stubborn she-wolves. Just listen for once in your life. Do you even know what is emerging?"

"Don't know, don't need to know."

"Does *Red* training not cover nymphs? By the dragon's teeth, are you that ready to die?" he snarled, but thankfully stopped tugging

on my arm. Only when I glanced over did I see it was so he could freely draw two blades.

I rolled my eyes and sat a hand on his forearm. He stood above me as if he were some avenging angel sent to protect me. His muscles—hard as chords of steal—clenched beneath my hand.

"I know what I'm doing. Put those away."

He stared, his eyes flickering with thoughts too quick for me to catch. Then, to my surprise, he listened. "Do not get us both killed, Little Red," he said, putting the blades away.

"Don't plan on it," I muttered.

"Who comes to my shore?" The voice echoed through the chamber, threaded through my soul, and made my entire being realize what I'd known in my existence was but a rock upon the shore of life's ocean.

"I'm Alia. This is Shen, and the little one is Fenbutt."

Shen startled. "Fen—what did you just call the pup?"

"It's a good name," I replied, crossing my arms.

Shen sputtered for a moment.

Did you just break the werewolf? Ran asked.

"It means—"

I cut him off. "Doesn't it fit?"

Shen stared at me, his mouth ajar and eyebrow twitching. "You are impossible."

"Takes one to know one," I said.

Fenbutt pranced up to me with a doggie smile and his tail slapping against his flanks. I reached down and scratched his head. He licked my fingers and then curled up beside Shen's foot and promptly fell asleep.

A chuckle came from the waters. "Not the usual wish-seekers, you are not. Why have you come seeking me?"

"We're not here for anything from you, but for you," I said, gently putting my hand in the waters. "Please, show yourself."

Shen drew in a sharp breath as a being emerged from the waters. Her hair came first, parting the waters which streamed around her in a mini waterfall. Her hair was the same turquoise as

the water, and unlike the nymph children, her hair laid like a normal human. That's where the similarities ended.

Her forehead was swirled with golden letters in a language I couldn't discern. Her skin was a soft amber, and her face was angular and striking. I would fear her, had I not been able to feel her *need*. Her eyes popped open, and they were topaz. No whites, just like the children, but they had a black pupil.

I bowed my head. "Hello," I whispered.

A *need* pulsed from her child… She needed to know. And I had a choice to tell. For now, though…

"What do you wish to give me?" Her lilting voice was heightened with puzzlement.

"You were not responsible."

She jerked back as if stung. "What do you know of this?" Her pupils dilated until there was only a thin ring of blue around them. Her hair lifted. Tiny heads on the ends moved as if with minds of their own.

The water swirled about my feet as I walked out into the placid lake. "I have a Gift and a Curse," I said. "I can feel your pain, dear one. But it is not yours to bear. The pain you carry is holding you back from the ones who love you in the here and now."

Her eyes slowly became blue once more, widening more than I thought possible. She was before me in the blink of an eye, her hair moving, almost as if studying my face. I saw the little ends had eyes and slender bodies; they looked like mini electric eels. Then a buzz sparked between two heads and I leaned forward, frankly enchanted by whatever those things were.

She spoke and I drew back, glancing back up at her face. "You —" Her voice broke and then it was as if her entire being faltered. Her body swayed, her face crumbling in pain, and I instinctively leaned forward, wrapping my arms around her waist. She was a head taller than me, but she rested her head on my shoulder, her body shivering.

And that's when I learned that this creature doesn't cry; they release their sorrow in wave after wave of sound. A heart-rending, undulating cry. I'd never realized a person breaking could be a

sound. In this harmony that would forever haunt my dreams, I realized this sound expressed what words never could.

I held her. I don't know what she took the blame for, or who she had lost.

But I knew the guilt one takes of a death they feel they should have been able to prevent, as if we were in control of the outcome of life and death.

But that's merely a faux form of control.

We don't control who lives and dies.

We only control how we live.

Shen

THE SONG BROUGHT me to my knees. Emotions erupted from corrupt and long-buried places deep in my soul.

The pup whimpered in his dreams, curling his tail around his body. I set my hand on his back as my forehead dropped to the sandy loam, my mouth opening in a voiceless cry. I glanced up through blurry vision to find the adult nymph enclosed in a human's fierce embrace, as if the human herself through sheer force could cause the nymph's pain to leave.

The nymph curled round the human, her entire body shivering with the force of the lament. Her face was lined with pain, the sorrow running deep.

The little human just held her. Let her pour out her pain.

A nymph was hugging a human. Until this time, I had not known the nymph had a physical form. It was noted they were possibly of the water and so were water personified. But with how Alia was hanging onto the nymph, the creature was not merely water personified but a physical being.

Slowly, the song softened until it was a mere hum, then it cut off. The song was a mere memory, but the emotions it summoned burned through the walls I had in place. Those emotions were going to be much harder to reel back into their prisons.

The nymph released Alia, stepping back. She gazed down at the human.

"You need to release what was to cradle what is. As the sea flows and the tides change, be yourself as flexible as water, as strong as a typhoon, and as unyielding as ice."

"Sage words for one so young. Do not think I know not what you are, Red of the Decimators who were once of us."

Alia did not cringe nor step back from the fierce words said with a hint of threat. I stepped forward, hands on my blades as Alia swayed. Her exhaustion was nearly pungent, and her breaths came in sharper gasps than I would like.

"My people have not been a friend of magic. I wish to change that."

I narrowed my eyes. Why had she kidnapped me if not to further the Red's agenda? Was she speaking a lie, or was she merely caught between her training and reality?

A few Reds had been excommunicated over the years, but I had not known of a Red to turn while still within the ranks of their brainwashed origins. Still, I smelled no lie.

And yet, that was unsurprising. This Red before me rode unicorns, kidnapped werewolves (and let them go), saved said werewolf at the cost of herself, rescued wolf pups, and comforted nymphs in the throes of sorrow.

"Your daughter will need this," Alia said, pulling something from a pocket of her tunic near her heart. Her hand shook as she held it out.

The nymph slowly reached forward. She grasped the stone in Alia's hand. Was that a mage stone? It had gentle gold swirls on its face. Alia took a moment, but then released the stone. "I will not forget you, Alia. In my time of great need, you were sent to provide comfort. But you yourself have not yet been provided such a boon, have you, child?"

Alia flinched, but tried to cover it with a light laugh that sounded broken. “I am happy to have been able to help you, honored one. Think no more of me. Should you live well and full, that is thanks enough.”

The nymph reached out, placing a hand on Alia’s head. “Such pain. In both of you.” Her eyes flicked up to me. In those eyes, I felt seen. And I did not like the feel of being laid bare before her. I looked away.

“There will come a time of need for you, and the boon you yet need will be granted.”

My eyes flicked back to her, just in time to see the two young nymphs leap from shore to collide with the full-grown nymph. They plastered themselves to her side, and she wrapped her arms around them, her thin lips spreading in a tender smile. She placed a kiss upon each head of hair before placing a final kiss upon Alia’s brow. Then they sunk into the glassy surface of the lake without a single ripple.

Alia swayed, and I jumped forward in time to catch her as she fell. Her lips were blue and her teeth were chattering, but her skin was burning.

I slid a hand behind her legs and scooped her up to my chest.

“M-My f-f-family,” she chattered.

“Easy, little one. You will return to them shortly. For now, rest.”

To my surprise, she nodded and her head fell to my shoulder.

I clutched her closer, knowing we must part sooner than later.

Better for her to leave my presence as soon as she was well so I would not tarnish her gentle spirit.

CHAPTER 11

Stress Can Kill

ALIA & SHEN

Alia

Between fevered dreams and burning heat interspersed with cold so deep it chilled my very bones, eyes with golden stars and hints of concern in them watched over me, and a little pup's tongue licked my face and hands, calming my racing heart. I didn't know how long it took for me to wake, I just knew that while I was there in my fevered dreams, Shen was too.

And that was… odd.

It should feel good to have someone there to help. But this? It felt wrong.

Every time fevered dreams took me, I saw my family's faces. My sister died, and I wasn't there. Her little ones went to her absent husband who had no idea how to care for them. My parents were trying to keep up but were losing strength. Dad didn't have time to hunt, and we needed food, and my other sister, Miranda, lay dead in my arms—

"Little Red, wake up."

The voice didn't belong to these gaunt faces staring at me with accusation. Those faces dispersed from my mind's eye as I struggled out of the fog.

Dark eyes rimmed in gold watched me.

“There you are. Are you back to the land of the living?” Shen said, a tiny, relieved smile gracing his lips.

I glanced around. But… this wasn’t…

I sat bolt upright, my hand falling to my side where a blade always hung, but it wasn't there. I glanced around, barely seeing the curtains above the window or the fire burning in the hearth across from the bed I laid in.

A cold hilt was set into my hand. My eyes flickered up to the werewolf. My breath eased with the knife in my palm.

“Please do not stab anyone,” he said, his eyes brightening for a mere moment. Was that a joke? “How are you feeling?”

When I opened my mouth to say something, only a croak erupted.

“I know. You are *fine*,” he said with a quirk of his lips. “You are in a safe house on the outskirts of Birchmark.” He held up a canteen to me, and I grabbed it with shaking hands. He helped me lift it to my lips, the water cooling my parched lips and tongue and soothing the burn still raging in my swollen throat.

“Why?” I croaked.

“You were in danger. I could not assist. So I brought you somewhere that could.”

“And you better be glad he did, young lady.”

My body quavered as adrenaline flushed my system. I quickly pushed back the covers and jumped to a knee, the knife curled back along my forearm and ready to slice. The bed seemed to tilt beneath me as my head swam, but I stayed upright through sheer stubbornness.

The man in the doorway held up his hands, his eyes crinkling with a kindly smile. “I mean no harm. I am the reason Shen brought you here.”

I blinked, scrunching up my nose and opening my mouth.

“You were *fine*, of course,” Shen mocked, crossing his arms and sending me a look which sent a trail of ice down my spine.

I shut my mouth with a clack of my teeth. How did he freakin’ know I was about to say that?

"You are nearly as scarred as our Shen, here," the person with spectacles said absent-mindedly and almost to himself as he glanced at the many scars along my arms and the few on my neck. The one on my neck was a jagged, rope-like scar that had nearly taken my life; it was a training accident from when I was younger.

"You know better than to ask questions like that here, Doc," Shen said with a casual, nearly blasé air that still rose the hair on the back of my neck.

"And you know anyone who comes into my house is my patient. Scars such as those leave imprints not just on the body but on the soul," Doc said.

Embarrassment filtered through me, and I glanced at the window. Shen casually moved so he was leaning against the bed frame—between me and said window. I scowled at him. His eyes burned with mischief. He knew exactly what he was doing, the cur.

The doc's face softened. "I know the look of a fighter. Treated many in my time. I am mostly retired now, taking care of the grandbabes and their pets. Those I treat for Shen are much alike: battered and bruised and ready to jump back in the fight. But I feel many of you are running from a different battle entirely. Feel free to tell me should I be wrong, but most are running from their feelings, and that is a very hard place to be, young one."

I stared at the healer, my mouth opening and closing with the uncertainty of how to answer the guy. His hair was a steely gray, his skin was weathered and tanned from working in the sun and his arms were still well-defined for a man of his age, even if his gut was a little tubby. He had a calm air about him, and his eyes displayed compassion.

"No need to answer now. Just know that ol' Tom will be here. Should you have need of my services, you know where I live. Come and speak with me. You would be amazed how a few words can help ease the burdens of the soul." He gave a succinct nod, then ran a hand over his hair. "Your fever broke this past night. I recommend another day of rest and a few more days of light work, but I imagine you will not take to such orders kindly. So merely take it easy so you do not land back on my doorstep, hmm? Take these. One is for

morning and evening; it is a mixture of honey, yarrow, chamomile, and fermented garlic. The other is Heper Sulph for the lung infection, Spongia for breathing, and Arnica for the cuts and bruises. Take each of these up to five times per day, for they are low doses."

I was surprised by his knowledge. Many of the new healers were going into new and improved—nearly experimental—things which nearly made people lose their lives instead of healing them. These were old, well-tested remedies that had survived the trial of time. I had personally seen them work much better than blood-letting.

"Six or thirty shake doses?" I finally asked.

His eyebrow lifted in surprise, reminding me of Shen when surprised. Were they related? He exchanged a glance with Shen, who shrugged. "I am impressed. The Spongia is a six, the other two are thirty. Are there any others you feel you may need?"

I glanced up at him. There was one I had trouble sourcing, as it didn't grow in our area for me to create a remedy of. And my sister needed it. "Ledum two hundred?"

His other eyebrow rose to reach the first one, then scrunched with concern. "Do you have another ailment I do not know of?"

I clenched my teeth. Do I lie or tell him the truth?

I'm a Red. I'm certain that if he knew, he would be giving me belladonna. And it wouldn't be the remedy—but maybe he could help. It was worth the risk.

"My sister's sick."

He nodded, the surprise dropping from his face as concern replaced it. "Would you care to list her symptoms? Perhaps two minds may be better than one?"

My hand clenched around my blade and my shoulders slumped a hair. These were two werewolves. Could I trust the doc and Shen with even further information about myself when I knew absolutely nothing about them?

A tiny whimper drew my eye to a little bundle of curled fur. I smiled as Fenbutt's little paws jumped in the air and the ripple of passed gas erupted as he ran.

"My sister's anemic. She's highly prone to lilac disease and dark circles and has little to no will to rise in morning. Lately, she has

experienced… episodes. Seizures. The only thing which will bring her back are mage stones, but even they have become less effective."

His brows furrowed. "Quite right, that. Mage stones are illegal for good purpose, as the ones who use them are less and less able to connect to their natural healing pathways. How many have you used?"

My shoulders slumped. I had been aware of the risks when I'd used the mage stones, but I couldn't just let her die. "Four. The last one I nearly got to her too late."

He nodded. "Do not feel bad, young one. You must do what you must do, and your situation was dire indeed. Dark circles are consistent with a liver or lymphatic function issue. What have you done so far?"

I bit my lip to hide the quiver. This was someone outside of our family who wasn't just saying, "Why doesn't she just get up and walk?" or "She's just faking it to get attention" or the absolute worst "If she were a better person, this never would've happened to her."

"We have attempted to replenish her stomach with high nutrient broth made from the joints and bones with marrow. I personally found and potentized the remedies of Belladonna, Apis Mel, and Chelidonium Majus but could not source Ledum. And, of course, the mage stones when nothing else works."

Shen stirred, his dark eyes heavy on me. I chose not to look at him.

Doc's lips pursed. He took the glasses from his face and polished the lenses. "What I am about to say goes no further than us, yes?" he finally said.

I narrowed my eyes, but nodded.

"I have known of a similar case. No remedies nor more modern versions of healing could cure this person, who eventually succumbed to his stresses." His eyes were on me, but from the corner of my vision, I saw Shen's eyebrow twitch. "This is not a physical problem." I clenched my teeth, nearly grinding them. This started out so well, but now he's just going to tell me she's crazy or not all there or seeking attention—

"It is a stress-borne illness."

I blinked at him, the hot words dying on my tongue as confusion replaced anger. What?

"Does she have someone in her life who is hard to deal with?" He spoke with such gentleness, as if knowing the words could hurt.

Pain ached in my heart. Could it be?

Part of me had wondered...

Shen

PAIN FLASHED ACROSS HER FACE. Her eyes fluttered closed. She did not show pain. She would be a mighty fine werewolf for the mere fact she acted much like one of us. Always remaining strong regardless of the pain I knew she was in after the fall. It made me wonder what other aches and pains she hid beneath that veneer of calm. And the depth of her pain for such an emotion to consume her face.

I forced my fists to relax.

"I will take that as a yes. Get her away from him, and she will become more at peace. But she must heal what was broken before she can live again. That is the good thing about brokenness: it can be mended with a bit of elbow grease and the right glue."

Doc was an uncle to me and my siblings, although we were not related by blood. I saw him often enough, that was for certain. He said he liked me keeping him busy, that he was bored in his old age. I guessed it was more for the affection he carried for my father.

Since I had known him for quite some time, I saw the determined line in the hint of his brow. He had adopted this little Red. She spoke his language, after all. I hardly understood a word of the jargon they had spouted, but I doubted Alia realized just how much she ingratiated herself into the Doc's mind. It would be humorous to see how long it would take Alia to realize the old doc had adopted her into his motley pack.

They continued speaking about her sister as I watched. The way her nose scrunched when she could not express her point properly and was thinking it through. How her hands clenched against the knife handle until they were whiter than a unicorn's horn when the conversation would turn to the stress her sister was under. She skillfully derailed Doc quite often, but he just as skillfully would bring it back around. He knew where her sister's situation would lead should they not acknowledge what was making her ill.

My teeth ground together as death pressed the surface of my memory. I took a breath.

It's still more painful than a blade in the kidney, Lycus whimpered.

Yes, it was. With what happened, I often wondered if I could have done something more. I had given my Alpha the ability to issue Commands with my first kill, but it was the death of Fen's birth father—and my paternal uncle—which shaped me. Killed by a Red, all because he was driven to insanity by his fated mate.

For years I had assassinated Reds in retribution for taking the last link to my father.

I had thought it was worth it. The revenge. The vengeance. The pain.

But now? Shame was my ever-present friend. It burned a seething pathway through my soul.

My mind turned back to the Red as she rose from the bed, her legs shaking nearly imperceptibly.

"I need to go home."

I growled. No way was I allowing her to go off while she was ill—

My brain came to a screeching halt.

She looked over at me, her nose scrunching in annoyance. It was her tell. Her nose spoke more than any other point on her face. "You've kept me alive. Your debt is paid. We'll go our separate ways—"

"Enough with the debt. That is not why I saved you."

"Then why—"

I should have left well enough alone. I pushed a breath out of my nose and stood from slouching against the bed. I stood over her

and sighed when she still retreated from me, as if my presence reminded her that death stalked her every move.

It was time to let this little curiosity growing within die. I had no room in my life for such things.

When in life should we stop living? Lycus asked.

You know better than most, this life is about survival, not living.

Can't it be both?

Sometimes I wondered if Lycus was the part of me that had not given up hope long ago. I tried to protect him—the wolven part of a werewolf is something indescribable. It was not unlike having another soul, another being within you. It is an odd but intimate relationship. Some wolves had forsaken their humans because they went against their wolven morals. And when a shifter loses their wolf side, they become rogues—insane creatures with a thirst for pain. My uncle was a perfect example of this.

Regardless, it was time for us to say goodbye to the little human.

"Do not concern yourself with such trivial matters. Is your unicorn around?" I asked.

Doc stood upright from where he was searching his medicine cabinet in the corner. "Unicorn?" he mouthed.

Alia nodded, confirming my suspicion that she was, in fact, bonded to the wicked creature.

She tilted her head up to look at me, a puzzled frown on her face.

"If not because I saved you, then why?"

Doc snorted. As a warning, I glared at him, though it went unheeded. He dared to *wink* as he said, "The boy is a bleeding heart, that is why."

Her head tilted, studying me. Then she nodded, as if it made sense. "Then, why do you ache so?" she whispered, so low I nearly missed it, even with my sensitive hearing.

She stuck out her hand. I slowly reached forward and was nearly jolted out of my skin when a gentle tingle ran up my arm. I tried to hide it. She seemed unaffected.

"Thanks… And if I see you again, I'll try not to stab ya."

My lips twitched. "Was that hard for you to utter?"

She looked like, should we be better acquainted, she would have been tempted to punch my shoulder. A part of me longed for that.

Down, boy, I whispered to Lycus.

He stretched in my soul, uncoiling from a nap. *Hmm?* he asked.

"Are you alright?" Alia asked.

My eyes cleared. I must have zoned out, a dangerous thing for one such as me.

That was when I smelled him.

"Pa, your youngest grandchild is needing—"

A low growl erupted in my throat. Alia stepped back, turning to stare at the man who just waltzed in the door as if he owned the place. Sure, he was set to inherit the estate once his father passed, but dragon's bane, he was not the owner yet!

"Oh dear, you must forgive my intrusion. Why is a lovely lady such as yourself so pale? Should I knock some sense into my pal, Shen, here?" I growled again, and my *pal* had the audacity to grin. "Don't worry about old grouchy pants over there. He's all growl and no bite."

Alia giggled.

Lycus came forward. My teeth grew, pressing against my lips and tongue. It was not a pleasant part of the shift, but it did not entirely hurt, either.

"Alright, that's my ticket to get out of here. See ya later, dudes, dudette, and Pa!"

"No, it's alright, I was just leaving," Alia said, stepping forward. "I'm Alia."

Fen's smile dropped minutely. His eyes narrowed and he took a deep breath. Then his smile returned as if it had never left. "Pleasure is all mine, Miss Alia. I'm Fen," Fen said.

I watched him, but he avoided my gaze. What was that about?

Alia bit her lip to contain her smile. Her eyes flew to the puppy currently sleeping, then back up to me. Something inside me uncoiled. Some long-dead piece of me awoke.

Her eyes crinkled and lips lifted in pure joy. My lips turned up to match hers without my permission.

“Has he ever smiled before?” Fen whispered out of the side of his mouth to a similarly discombobulated Doc, who shrugged.

“Fenbutt?” I said. Alia giggled, making my heart turn with something I could not quite determine.

The pup on the floor jerked upright, his tail wagging as he trotted to me. My annoying *pal* glanced at me with confusion.

"I know what fenbutt means, but Fen is another matter. It’s a regal name. Perhaps you’ve heard of my great-grandfather, Miss Alia? He was said to have strangled a bear with his bare hands," Fen said.

It was not a funny pun, but Alia laughed politely. "He sounds like a great man," she replied.

I snarled.

The sound made Fen smile, and he sent me a tiny salute. The kid was like a little brother, teasing all your weak points. And blast it, I had given him quite the bruise to poke.

“Run,” I growled.

Fen bowed to Alia. “That’s my cue to leave, m’lady. Pleasure, and all that—” His eyes darted up to me. He sauntered out the door at a much quicker pace than when he had arrived.

“Our Fen can be quite the character,” Doc said, scratching his head as he watched his son retreat, though there was genuine affection in his voice.

Alia turned to me. “You aren’t going to hurt him, right?”

I blinked at her, trying to appear innocent, which was hard for one who tended to scowl more than smile.

She narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms. “Right?”

I sighed. “Alright. I will not harm the idiot. Too badly.”

“Shen!” she admonished.

Doc was looking between us, his eyes too knowing for my good. “Time to get you home, young one.”

CHAPTER 12

Homeward Bound

ALIA

It took over three hours to get back to my tribe on Ran. Mostly because of the roundabout way I took to hold off any stragglers. Namely, an Alpha prince and a little pup. I was surprised Hood didn't come for him. Maybe Hood knew what capabilities Shen had and so decided to hold off on the rescue in hopes he'd kill his kidnapper.

And it was a near thing. Even now I could feel the way his hand wrapped around my neck; the ease with which he could snap my spine with a simple twist of his wrist.

Shen was my enemy, and I'd do well to remember it.

When did it go from Wolfie *or* It *to Shen?* Ran commented, side-eyeing me.

I groaned and rubbed my palms into my eye sockets, trying to relieve some of the pressure building there. I didn't have an answer for that. And now I needed new plans to draw Hood out, and the last one took months and quite a few bribes to cook up.

A howl echoed at my back. I turned, but it was only a regular brown wolf calling for its pack. You could tell because the call wasn't one of longing or hope. Wolves took life and didn't look back or forward, they lived for the present. Shifters were sometimes like that if they were more attuned to their wild side, but many times their voices were tinged with something only a human mind could imagine—hope or despair.

Wolves felt. Don't get me wrong. All animals have needs and feelings, but they lived in the moment. They held joy, satisfaction in a good hunt, and grief very close. As wolves were close relatives to werewolves, we Reds often studied them in the wild. Once, I saw a wolf lose his mate. He followed her into death shortly after. I always say he died of a broken heart. And his *need* was for his mate. I pray they're reunited, running free without pain or fear.

I shook off the feeling of eyes following me and dismounted Ran. Only my family knew of the bond I had with a unicorn. My tribe would bury me under lava if they knew I not only let a magical creature *live,* but bonded the dratted thing.

As if you had a choice, Ran said, snorting into my ear.

I grunted and batted her off, digging gooey slime out of my ear. "Shut up. I should've left you to die."

You are many things, Two-Legs. A cold-blooded killer is not one of them.

I took off the halter I used as a bridle—Ran would not wear a bit—along with the saddle and rigging, sticking it in a buried hut about a mile out from the village. For emergencies, I'd ride her bareback, but then my butt would be sore from her bony back for a week. I much preferred the comfort of my padded saddle, thanks.

She shook her entire body, her hair puffing and dirt flying off. She nuzzled me. I kissed her velveteen nose before she snorted and dove off into the underbrush.

I smiled at her retreating form and finished locking the shack, hid it from view with a carefully constructed board of cultivated moss, and used a tool that was partway between a broom and branch to hide our footsteps. I checked it over with a critical eye and nodded. Should be good.

My sleep-deprived body carried me back to my hut on the edge of tribe territory and very near the Red Pit, which was a large sand pit for training. Shouts and metal clashing were heard in the distance from the Red School of Arts—don't let the name fool you, it's not the fancy type of art taught in guilds in the city—and the braying of donkeys mixed with the almost serene ring of chimes

meant to ward off evil creatures. One such chime hung on our porch, the sweet melody both haunting and gentle at once.

Then the *needs* hit me.

My shoulders slumped, and for a moment, I leaned against the round, rough-hewn railing on our tiny porch. I was about to enter a different sort of battle, and I just didn't feel like it. My head hurt, my bones ached, and I felt like I needed to sleep for a week to stop my arms and legs from shaking with fatigue.

But I had to face this. My family needed me.

So I shoved my shoulders back and knocked. The house was eerily quiet, with the cackle of hens and the occasional call of the rooster coming from around back. We lived in a quaint little cabin with rust and milk paint that made the rough-hewn boards and planks of the house a slightly reddish hue. There were three sleeping areas, a kitchen, and a small area with a fireplace. The A-frame roof needed a patch soon and there was a rail nearly ate through by ratfink wood eaters… My thoughts fled when Mom opened the door. The *needs* hit me full force.

Mom gathered me into a hug. Her warm aura enfolded me, made me feel all melty inside. But that couldn't last long, as the beating of her *need* crashed against me as if it were a hammer beating against the inner walls of my Gift or Curse or whatever it was.

Mom pulled back, scouring me from head to toe, searching for injury.

I stuffed down my exhaustion, giving her a bright smile. "You guys wouldn't believe what happened to me!" I said, giving her a peck on the cheek and dancing through the door. Her eyes lit, a tiny smile melting away most of the worry. "I rescued a wolf pup—"

"You did what?" Dad said, wiping mud off his hands and catching Fina before she toppled from the chair she was playing in, holding her upside down as he stared at her. "What in the King's good name do you think you're doing, little one?" he asked, tickling her sides with his muddy fingers. Her giggles rose, making a genuine smile cross my lips.

"Leelee!" Fina cried, lifting her pudgy fingers and reaching for me.

"How's my favorite littlest niece, eh, Feefee?" I asking, lifting her upright and kissing her plump cheek.

"Puppup?" she asked, pointing out the door.

I chuckled. "Later, we'll go see Puppup, alright?" Puppup was Princess, our milk goat Fina had a fascination with.

She pouted, but then she saw Jacob rushing around and watched him and his spindly arms and legs in awe. He tripped over a chair, barely missed impaling himself on a blade, and landed on the rug.

"Aren't you supposed to be at the academy, young man?" Mom asked, crossing her arms. I could feel her *need* pounding against my insides like a knife against glass.

"Sorry, Mom—there!" He pulled out his bow from behind the couch, where one of the other kids—namely Jess—had likely hid it.

"Jacob, why can't you be more like your sister?" Mom asked, her voice oozing disappointment.

Jacob's entire being collapsed. His grin faded, his eyes lost their sparkle, and his shoulders curved in as if to hide from her disapproving glare.

I forced a snort-laugh. "Mom, don't you remember? I nearly died because I forgot to bring charcoal when we were practicing poisons."

Mom's disapproving stare left Jacob, who glanced at me with gratitude in his eyes before scurrying out the door.

I gave Mom a pointed glance. She winced, rubbing her forehead. "I did it again, didn't I?" she whispered.

I nodded. "Understanding, love, and support," I whispered.

"Jacob!" Mom yelled.

Jacob froze. I felt his *need* to know he was good enough and that his differences didn't make him unlovable.

Mom scurried over to him, wrapping him in one of her rib-crushing, heart-warming hugs. "I'm so sorry, hon. I spoke out of frustration and exhaustion and took it out on you. None of this was your fault. Jess had attempted to play with it earlier. I bet it was her who stuck your bow there. You are enough. You are loved. You work so hard, and I am so freakin' proud of ya," she said, kissing his hair.

His smile lit up the room. His eyes shone with his childlike joy and his entire being nearly vibrated with happiness as his *need* was

being met.

While Mom sent off Jacob—who was rambling about some old, crusty library book that he'd found in a locked box—I scurried over to my silent sister in the corner. Jacob picking locks wasn't unlike him, the kid was a curious creature who saw rules as something to overcome; Jess having nothing to say, on the other hand, was uncharacteristic.

"Hey, kiddo. What's up?" I asked, sitting beside her.

She turned her back to me, sniffling.

"That's ok. I'm just gonna sit here, is that ok?" She sniffled again, but didn't say anything. Then she gave a tiny nod, and I relaxed back into the rough wooden wall. She *needed* someone to be there. She wasn't quite ready to talk, but sometimes taking up space and sitting with someone in their pain was enough.

"Dad said our family is cursed cause Great-Grandpa died by a werewolf," she whispered at last.

Despite him being my elder sister's husband, Rey could rot in a latrine pit by the tanners. What was he doing, telling such things to an impressionable child?

My fingers clenched into fists. An image crossed my mind. I heard the screaming, saw the black werewolf with red eyes and fangs as long as my fourteen-year-old fingers, and watched again as the werewolf tore through my grandpa's throat. I shook off the memory, swallowing back bile. "Can I give you a hug?" I asked, coming back to the present and feeling her *need*.

She nodded, rammed into my chest and wrapped her shaking arms around my neck. I clutched her to me.

"Is it true?" she whispered.

I shook my head, but stopped. She didn't *need* me to answer that question. She *needed* to think it through for herself. "What do you think?" I asked.

She relaxed against me, sucking her thumb. Yes, she was a bit old for that, but it was something that gave her comfort when she needed it, so I never scolded her. She pulled her thumb from her lips and sighed. "No," she whispered. "Just because bad things happen doesn't make us responsible for them."

I blinked back tears, hugging her tighter before she pulled back. I kissed her forehead, looking into her eyes. "I'm so proud of you, ya know that?"

She gave me a tiny smile, one that made her brown eyes crinkle. She'd gotten Mom's blonde hair and Dad's brown eyes. A perfect little mix of them both, even if sometimes there was a hint of Rey in the tilt of her chin.

"Can I do anything else for ya?" I asked, pushing some hair from her eyes.

She shook her head, getting off my lap and dancing off to get into some sort of trouble.

I leaned my head against the wall, trying to rein in the emotions beading on my soul. If I let them free now, I wouldn't be able to reel them back.

Hold it in. Not too much longer now.

"Alia, have seen my—my, umm—"

"Your satchel is on the table beside the back door, Dad," I said.

I heard his steps and then his "Oh!" I let my lips lift in a sad smile.

"You're our own little angel, you know that, Little Curo?" Dad said, coming around behind the couch to kiss my forehead. "Get you some rest, and we'll talk about you saving little wolf pups later, alright?" His dark eyes were alight with mirth even as he faux-scowled down at me.

I grinned up at him and his teasing.

He paused before going out the door. "Are you alright, dear?" he asked, turning back around.

I blinked, then blinked again. I got up, pasting a smile on my face. "Dad, I'm fine," I said, shaking my head.

"You just seem tired, is all. Anything I can help with?"

I clenched my hand around my opposite forearm, digging my nails in to keep from allowing the tears building in my chest to make their way to my eyes. Dad was so sweet, but he couldn't know. He had too much on his shoulders as it was.

He and Mom took care of Anna's little ones, Jess and Fina, as if they were their own and attempted to keep their heads above water

helping to pay for Anna's treatments. I brought back what I could to help financially, and I tried to only go on missions when I could get back before the first day of the week when my parents went to work so I could help babysit. Even though pitching in put me behind, I was still at the top of my class and heir apparent. Grandma may still choose another, but it was unlikely if I should prove myself worthy by bringing her Hood's head.

Fina screamed and giggled from her play area, so I got up to find her in a massive diaper blow-out, playing in her own—

I sighed and rubbed my tired eyes. It was going to be a long day.

Mom returned after an hour, her eyes filled with fear. "It's—it's—you've gotta go. Get out of here, I'll take—" She swiped Fina from my arms. Fina began crying, feeling the energy shift in the room.

Mom was running around, grabbing my go-satchel with all my remedies in it. My heart sunk.

"Anna?" I asked. Fear threatened to bubble up, but I stuffed it down. My family needed me.

Mom nodded, settling Fina with her favorite doll—or, at least, trying to. Pale-faced and frantic, Mom tried to get Fina settled even as she handed me my things.

I set my hands on her shoulders, forcing her to stop and look at me. "Mom? I need to you listen to me right now, alright?" Her fevered eyes darted around, but then landed back on me. She nodded. "Good. I need more information. Tell me what's wrong with Anna."

"She collapsed. The healer doesn't know what to do for her. She's unconscious, barely breathing."

When this occurs, she needs… I drew in a sharp breath. I'd given my last mage stone to the nymph. I thought I would have time to get another. Most times these episodes happened every two new moons at most; this was the second time within a single moon cycle.

As bad as I hated it, I needed help. From the last place I thought I'd ever ask. But they were my only hope. My black-market supplier told me in no unclear words I'd have to find someone else to buy from.

Ran.

I feel you, Two-Legs. What's wrong?

Anna. She's collapsed again. I need another mage stone.

A burst of concern passed through the bond. *What can I do?*

Go to the doc's house. You remember what I taught you about spelling?

Of course, Two-Legs. You were an idiot trying to reach a club-footed creature—Wait. You don't mean for me to—

Exactly. Spell it out to him. Please.

Blasted two legs. Fine. I'll be back when I can.

"Mom, I've got Anna. But you need to take deep breaths before you pass out. I can't leave until you're able to take care of Fina and Jess, alright?"

Mom took a moment, her eyes hazy as if far away, but then they snapped back to me. She gave a sharp nod, determination burning in her eyes.

"Good job, Mom. You've got this. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"You're needed more there, hon. Take your time. We trust you."

I nodded, hoping against hope Doc would part with a mage stone. If not… my sister...

No, I wouldn't go there. Ran would come through. She had to.

CHAPTER 13

A Battle for Life

SHEN

"Are you certain you wish to forfeit your right?"

"I am," I said.

Fen met my gaze head on, his blue eyes searching mine. Not quite a challenge, but too close for Lycus. He edged forward, taking a hint of control over this form, and we grabbed Fen by the neck.

Fen lowered his gaze as protocol demanded when dealing with a stronger pack member, but his scent was neither repentant nor submissive.

"The human girl—"

My hand spasmed and choked off his voice before I released him. "Do not speak of her."

Fen rubbed his neck, eyeing me. "Sure. Don't speak of the one human who made you smile. Don't speak of the person who—"

I glared. He raised his hands and his smile returned, but the expression behind his eyes said he saw more than I wished. "Sheesh, you're extra touchy today. Need a spar?"

"I would likely kill you."

Fen grinned, taking my morbid humor for what it was. If I was going to kill the kid, it would have been long ago. I was stuck with him. To my absolute delight.

He's worse than barnacles, Lycus commented.

At least barnacles clean the waters.

Lycus snorted a laugh.

“Someday you’re going to realize the asset you’re consistently degrading,” Fen said, a smile on his face as if he could not be bothered by my mood.

He was a good sort. Not that I would tell him that.

The Glass Palace rose before us, a towering building with stained glass windows on its five floors. It had its own turrets around the edges of the roof and four watchtowers on top.

A frown marred my lips as an omega with silver hair and wrinkled skin was pushed from the door by a guard with a white wolf emblem on his chest. The mark of my Alpha.

I slid into a shadowed corner. Fen followed, silent as a wraith behind me as I scented the woman’s desperation.

The woman bowed her head, kneeling before the guard. “Please, kind sir, I have belonged to this pack since the days of your grandmother. I will do anythin’—”

There was a low, sarcastic grunt. “You can no longer carry dishwater, old woman. Find yourself a new home, you are no longer welcome here by order of the Alpha.” He shut the gated door with a screeching clang. The omega flinched.

Fen set a hand on my shoulder. A growl rumbled from my chest. I cut it off, but not before the omega glanced over, squinting her pale eyes to see into the darkness. She sniffed. Her eyes widened and the heady scent of fear brushed my nose. “Forgive me, sirs, I meant no disrespect. I will be out of your hair—”

I stepped from the corner and knelt before her. She shrunk into herself, her body frail with age. She had a simple white frock with a threadbare cotton dress beneath. Her silver hair was pulled back into a bun, some strands escaping the pins and swaying in the wind.

It was times like this I cursed my appearance. “I will not harm you,” I said. My tone was hard with the anger coursing through my bones.

Fen sniffed in disdain. “Big Wolfie here is all bark, no bite,” he said in a conspirational whisper. I shouldn’t have told him what Alia called me. It was biting me in the rear.

My lips lifted in a mock snarl as Fen winked at the elderly woman who glanced up at him.

"I meant no harm, kind sirs," she repeated, her voice faltering.

"It is us who should be ashamed. You have served my family well, Matilda."

A tiny, awed smile crossed her lips. "You remember?"

I tried to return her smile, but dropped it when she recoiled slightly. "You changed my small clothes when I was a babe. Of course I remember you."

Grinning, she slowly pushed up and took Fen's offered hand to raise on shaky legs. "Ya were always a kind child, sir. I didna realize it continued to the man."

I did not know what to say to that as she gently patted my cheek with her weathered hand that had served my family for decades. "I will find you a place, madame," I said. "Do you care to answer why you were cast from the pack?"

Her face paled. She bowed her head, baring her neck. "I don't mean to speak ill of the pack, sir." She glanced back at the ten-foot-high wall and shivered.

"I understand," I said as gently as possible. "But it would be helpful to know."

She stared at me, her pale-blue eyes seeing more than I anticipated wanting her to know. "The Alpha—she issued a rule for any pack member unable to carry on their services to be cast from the pack."

My teeth clenched. "Why?"

She trembled at my tone. "For the strength of the pack, sir."

"Fen, will your father be able to handle another pack on his lands?" I asked.

Fen nodded, anger flashing in his eyes bellied by the gentle smile on his face aimed at the elderly woman. "He will gladly do so."

"Good. Madame, please gather all who are expelled. You all will be cared for, as it should be." My being softened at the tears pooling in the bottom of her eyes. "No one should treat a valued member with such cruelty."

Her lip trembled. "Source bless you, my boy," she whispered, leaning up to kiss my cheek in a show of respect.

She went off with Fen, and it hardened my resolve. The pack was slowly strangled under Mother's rule. It had to change.

THE GUARD BOWED when I walked in. A runner darted from a darkened alcove, racing ahead of me through the passageways of the cold, huge building some would call a palace, but which I knew was merely a shell where the pack slept at night.

A long hallway lay before me with ostentatious statues painted in gold and precious metals—some of snarling wolves, others of knights in full chain-mail, and a few of scandalously clad women. Behind them were highly detailed tapestries, each depicting various battles of all kinds of creatures. From werewolves and dragons to dark fae and nymphs, should you look hard enough, you could find nearly any known being. The ceiling, high above as it was, had paintings of cherubim and palaces and endless forests.

My feet sunk into the deep red fabric lining the hallway. A mouse squeaked behind one statue, his little heart racing as I passed. A tiny smile creased my lips. Mother hated the little creatures with a passion. It was good to see one had survived her extermination to chew on her precious tapestries.

At the end of the seemingly endless hallway was a door. Quite plain compared to the rest of the hall, for reasons I had yet to discern.

My heartbeat was steady, my mind caged, my wolf sleeping. It would do no good for him to be party to what would come. I had fought a direct order, something she would not abide.

Why return at all? Lycus whimpered.

Dragon breath. I thought he was still asleep.

Better to be free for a time of our choosing and death to be by our hand than a lifetime of chains, Lycus said.

Were it not for my pack, I might have agreed. I could not leave them behind.

Lycus whimpered, but he knew as well as I what would happen to the pack should we leave without placing another in power. I could not challenge her and win—the Command insured such things. That did not mean I could not have her replaced, though.

The door opened beneath my palm. My oldest sister and my mother sat on glass thrones at the head of a massive hallway cloaked in a red runner. This area was much plainer compared to the hallway outside, putting the emphasis on the sparkling throne chairs on a dais at the far end.

"Come, protector. Come, tell me of your adventures." Mother's gentle, feminine voice echoed in the throne room.

I drew a deep breath, clenched my teeth, and barely kept my heart under control. Werewolves heard heartbeats. Mine would not betray any hint of emotion she could use against me.

It was not pain I feared. No. It was the thoughts she may draw from my mind should she enforce a Command to make me speak. It had happened before when she had been suspicious of my actions. Mother was meticulous about obedience.

"I infiltrated the stronghold as asked. They have no one speaking of anarchy. A well-armed party took me from the residence, keeping me for undisclosed reasons. I escaped, but the party later attacked while you were present, knocking me from the cliff as I was attempting to hand the puppy to your knight."

Mother's blonde hair uncoiled from its bun as she removed a blade made to look like a fine, silver pendant. "Oh. Do go on."

Go time. "I survived. My attacker and the puppy did not."

"Hmmm. And why did you survive?"

"You have trained me well, Mother," I said, bowing from the waist. The words tasted of ash on my tongue, but they were necessary.

A small grin pulled at her tight lips. Mother's blue eyes glistened with malice.

My sister, however, sat with her eyes on me, her eyebrow raised a tiny hair and forehead creasing. I might have passed Mother, but Beatrice knew. It would only depend on how she planned to use that information to her advantage that was concerning.

“Good. But you hesitated before giving up the puppy. Why?” Mother asked.

I bowed my head to avoid meeting her eyes as protocol dictated for a contrite werewolf. “Forgive me, Mother. I saw a being behind you. I worried they would attack you, and I struggled within the haze of command.”

Beatrice coughed into her hands. I feared she’d caught my morbid humor. Nothing I could help now.

Mother’s sharp fingernails clacked against the edges of the throne. “Good. Then you will bring me the body of the puppy.”

“I do not know where it is,” I said.

“You bury the bodies of your dead. Do not deny it.”

“It was swept downriver. I did not take time to retrieve it.”

The noise of her nails grating on my ears was nearly as bad as her voice. “I have another mission for you.”

CHAPTER 14

Mage Stone

ALIA

It was bad. The first indicator was the wheeze. Anna only wheezes when her lungs were having trouble functioning. When her body was shutting down from the stress it was under.

"Curo, thank Source you're here," Rey said, pushing around the corner to give me a hug. His voice was a too loud. My sister flinched. She was sensitive to stimuli when like this. But Rey didn't know. How could he?

"Hey, how is she?" I asked.

"She came to consciousness a moment ago, but her eyes couldn't focus and she just screamed."

I walked over to her, pushing strands of hair behind her ear, watching her flinch at my touch. She was awake. Thank goodness. But she was in so much pain—the healer was poking and prodding, Rey was talking to his cousin Graham much too loud, and everything was giving off energy. Nervous, anxious, worried energy.

"Everyone out," I hissed. The healer looked up and nodded, immediately packing his things.

"I'll stay," Rey said. "I can rub her feet."

I clenched my teeth, but nodded. He was her husband, after all. What right did I have to toss him out?

Graham came over. "If you need anything, I'll be downstairs," he whispered, his eyes filled with compassion. I gave a hasty nod.

Rey went to Anna's feet, rubbing them. She tensed further and winced. "Gently," I admonished.

He went slower and easier, and my sister slowly relaxed. She opened her eyes, and they were resigned. "Nuh-uh," I whispered. "You aren't giving up on me."

They cleared just a hair, but the pain… *Please, let me bear her pain,* I thought to Source. But that was not my Gift. My Gift was knowing her *need* and being unable to do a thing about it.

Her *need* was two-pronged. She needed peace and a safe place to rest. She needed something to balance and support the organs. I drew out my kit.

"Stay with me, sis. When you get well, where do you want to go?"

"Spec—" She began coughing.

Guilt curdled in my soul. I shouldn't have asked. But now I knew.

"We'll go there. We'll watch the fairies tend to the bioluminescent mushrooms growing along the watershore. It'll be such fun to watch the kiddos splash in the clear water, just as we used to. Remember? It was our favorite place as kids." I spoke as I gathered my satchel, opening it to my remedy kit. "We'll make hair ribbons of the pink water fronds and tie sunflowers to the end. The birds will call out to their families, singing of the beauty and wonder of the gentle waterfall at the far end of the crystal-clear waters. And maybe, just maybe, we'll see the stag of the forest come to the edge for a drink, dipping his massive head to gently sip at the waters."

I shook the remedy bottle, and Anna automatically opened her mouth. I popped the tincture beneath her tongue. She was more relaxed, but her *needs* screamed at me, pulsing against my soul like battering rams.

And although she relaxed and the peace came to her mind and that need cleared, her body was too far gone. It was shutting down; there were too many needs for me to keep up with.

I needed that mage stone.

Where are you, Ran?

THE NIGHT WAS long and fogged with needs. I attended to everything I could, but it wasn't enough. Never enough.

Anna's breathing slowed. She was no longer conscious to listen to what we would do when she felt better. I needed that mage stone. And I needed it now.

Ran?

I'm coming, she said.

I nearly collapsed then and there. I leaned against the wall outside my sister's room, letting my body sag.

"Hey, you ok?" Graham asked.

I quickly straightened, turning with a smile. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just tired."

His eyes were uncertain. "You were amazing last night, Alia."

A gentle warmth spread in my soul. "Thanks," I said, shifting my feet awkwardly.

"Would you…"

"Yes?" I prompted him to continue.

"Would you like me to walk you home? After… ya know, everything?" His cheeks were tinged with red, and I found it somewhat adorable. My mind flashed back to strong, sure arms and a *need* so deep it squeezed my heart like a paper press, but Graham was here and now. I'd likely never see that odd werewolf again. Good riddance.

"Sure," I said.

His eyes lit up. "Oh, and here's you a water and jerky. I didn't see you eat or drink anything last night."

My stomach rumbled, and I put a hand to it, my cheeks heating.

He chuckled. "Seems I was right."

"Thanks," I said.

"Alia!" the frantic scream pierced through the hall and made my hair stand on end.

I slammed the door open to see my sister shaking on the bed; her needs were slicing through me as her life teetered on a precipice.

"Place a leather between her teeth. Keep her alive until I get back," I ordered through clenched teeth.

Rey took a step forward. "Alia, don't you dare leave us—"

I ran to the window and jumped, landing and rolling as I hit the dirt road outside my sister's home. I had to meet Ran. It was Anna's only chance.

Numbness overwhelmed everything else. Nothing mattered. I knew my sister would die without me, but I couldn't stand around and watch her suffer.

Ran screeched to a halt before me, in the middle of the street. What the heck was she doing? She could be killed if she remained here and someone saw her.

Saddlebag, she said.

She tossed her head as I ran to her side, pulling out the swirling mage stone and then running back to my sister.

Get out of sight. NOW! I nearly screamed at her inside my brain.

Take care of your sister, Two-Legs. I'll take care of me.

I couldn't spare a moment for her, knowing every second counted. A mage stone couldn't bring someone back from death.

I slid into Anna's home, quite literally. My elbow and shin took the brunt of the impact as I slammed into the wall. There was no pain. The stairs seemed to go on forever until I was suddenly in her room.

Anna was still.

I came to her head, pressing the stone to her chest and hitting the part which activated the stone.

"Come on! WORK!" I shouted, pressing the stone again. It stayed gray with the gentle swirls of writing no one knew how to read. It should be bright.

The healer felt for a pulse in her wrist. "You may be—"

"Don't you dare finish that sentence," I growled, my hand on a blade.

The healer froze as if he saw a tiger hidden in the woods. He slowly stepped back, his hands upraised.

My eyes darted back to my sister. "Please," I whispered as I put my forehead to hers. "Fight!" I said. "Come back to us. Come back to me. What am I to do with Jacob and his little infatuations without you there to tease him with me? What about little Fina and Jess? They need their momma; their auntie will never do for long. Please, sis. Please," I whimpered.

I closed my eyes, one tear dribbling from my cheek to land on her nose. A bright light flashed and my eyes popped open to see the stone glowing so brightly it was hard to look at.

A deep breath filled my lungs. Anna's needs assailed me.

And I was never so happy to feel those *needs* or hear her wheeze.

Graham walked me home, but I could hardly speak. My lungs felt tight and my soul felt scoured. I just wanted to be alone.

Especially knowing I had to face Mom and the rest of them when I got home.

Mom raced out the door, staring at my face. "How is she?" she whispered.

"She's ok," I said, smiling.

Mom crumpled. Her shoulders bowed, her face seemed to age before my eyes, and she grew pale. She swayed. Graham caught her before she hit the ground.

I wanted to fall into a ball and cry.

"Help me get her into the house, please," I said, my voice emotionless.

Graham looked at me with concern, but he gripped under Mom's arms and I got her feet. We sat her on the rug before the fireplace, and I turned her head to make certain her tongue didn't choke her.

Dad came down the stairs, his face pale but his jaw strong. “Is she… ?”

“Anna’s fine, Dad,” I said. He leaned against the rail, the only weakness he would allow.

“Fina and Jess?” I asked, even as I opened my satchel and retrieved the Aconite.

“Abed,” Dad said. “What can I do?”

“Heat up some water. She’ll need valerian and hops when she wakes.”

“Will do,” he said. He came by where I knelt beside Mom. He leaned down and kissed my hair. “Proud of you, kiddo.”

I clenched my teeth so I wouldn’t cry. “Thanks, Dad.”

He nodded and went to get the water boiling.

A few minutes later, Mom woke up with a headache. She was disoriented and kept asking about Anna, to which I always said she was fine.

I walked Graham out. "I think I love you," he said, wringing his hat in his hands.

I stared at him. I opened and closed my mouth, then opened it again.

His smile was sad. "And I think I know you don't love me. Friends?" he said at last.

I smiled. "Friends," I said, sticking out my hand.

We shook on it, and with a sad smile he left.

I glanced back at the house, but I couldn't go in there. Not yet. I went to the woods.

Ran came, nuzzling my chest and lapping at my face.

And I sat on a log with Ran’s nose resting on my ear and her warm breath rustling my hair while I stared at a spider spinning its web in a willow tree.

"HEY, SIS, HOW YA FEELING?" I laid my satchel on a table and sat gently on the bed.

Anna's eyes focused on me. They were red rimmed and sunken, but since her needs weren't battering or cutting into my soul, they weren't life threatening. We'd bought another day.

She gave me a tiny smile. "Much better, thanks to you," she whispered, her voice breathy.

I smiled back, unable to help the prick of tears which I shoved back. I almost lost her yesterday. I couldn't do that again. "It was just a little shove. You did the fighting."

Her eyes closed and she winced. "What if I'm tired of fighting?" she whispered.

"Then you're tired of fighting. And freak, that's ok. I'll be here to help you when you get tired, ok?"

She opened her eyes, the dull blue brightening just a touch. "You're the best sis, you know that?"

Guilt hit me in the gut. If I were such a good sister, she'd be well by now. I buried that and playfully nudged her leg. "Takes one to know one," I replied with a wink. "Did you hear about Jacob's new crush?"

Her eyes sparkled. "Nope. What happened?"

"Mom took Fina and Jess to the market, like usual, right? But she spotted Jacob. He wasn't in training—" She gasped. "RIGHT? So she saw him sitting with this little cute redhead. He tried to kiss her on the cheek."

"Oh no."

"Yep. The girl was turned away. When she turned back and saw how close he was—"

Anna was already giggling. It caused her wheeze to worsen, but she needed her spirits lifted. Missing so much broke her, but hearing the tales like this made her feel as though she were still a part of it.

"She didn't," Anna got out between chuckles.

"Oh yes she did. And get this, they were sitting on the fountain, you know the one in the center of town with all the pigeons?"

"No."

"Yes."

We both broke down into snorting, totally unladylike laughter. "He was soaked head to toe, pigeon poo in his hair, and a black eye."

"Oh, poor Jacob!" she said, settling back into the pillows once more. "I wish I woulda been there to see it."

I set a hand on hers. "You will be," I said.

She nodded, and I next told her about the idiot cobbler who made shoes two different sizes on purpose, then about the boy who thought a skunk was a puppy. When I told her it had taken a week's worth of tomatoes to get the smell out of the boy's clothes, we were laughing hysterically. Then the door behind me opened with a crack.

Anna's laughter cut off and her eyes widened. Was that… fear?

"Can you be quiet? I mentioned there were customers downstairs. You've run off two of our best buyers!"

"Alia was just trying to help—"

"Alia was being more than helpful," he sneered. He ran a hand down his face and softened his tone. I was staring, open-mouthed. I didn't know who this person was; Rey had always been nice and even sweet when I'd seen him. "Could you two just please be quiet during business hours? We need this money to pay for the bills and debts so we don't lose this place."

Anna flinched as if he'd hit her. His eyes lit with something I didn't like even as he frowned. "We'll be quieter," Anna whispered, her voice the breathy, soft thing that it was when I arrived.

"I'm so sorry, honey. I—I didn't mean to yell. It's just, you've been so sick and it's made me so worried. You know I love you, right? Always have and always will," he said, taking her hand and kissing it.

She smiled up at him, but it was strained. "Of course, my love. I love you too." He stared at her until she said, "Always have, always will."

He kissed her and went out the door, whistling.

Doc's words repeated in my head. "*Only stress typically causes a person to get as sickly as your sister,"* he'd said.

I'd seen this behavior a few times, and Mom had commented on it, but Dad and I typically wrote it off. Rey's under a lot of pressure.

He's trying to care for his sick wife and earn enough for his children.

Then again, he hardly ever comes to see his children, who stay with my parents and me. We buy their meals and their clothes. We thought it was just because Ray was busy.

"Has he ever hit you?" I whispered to my sister.

She smiled and patted my hand that was resting on the bed. "No, sis. Never. And he never would."

I thought that meant she was ok. I thought that meant he wasn't abusing her.

If only I'd known then that abuse doesn't just mean bruises on the skin. Sometimes the scars are too deep for a person to see from the outside. And just because someone has never been hit doesn't mean they aren't suffering abuse.

I FORGOT TO MENTION SOMETHING.

I paused washing out the cloth diaper as Ran's voice invaded my mind. She sounded hesitant, which made me nervous. *Yes?*

The mage stone came with a favor.

Ran, so help me spill it or I'm putting peppermint oil in your meat—

I promised you'd help the werewolf in a mission.

"You did WHAT?"

Mom stuck her head out the door where I was by the well. "Ran," I said by way of explanation.

Mom gave a sage nod. Was that a hint of a grin around her mouth as she ducked back inside?

"When and where?"

New moon. Harbor district. I thought… well…

I felt her unease and realized she'd had no choice, and she still felt bad about it. *You did the right thing, Ran. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to yell.*

I'm sorry I got you into it.

I sighed. *You didn't get me into anything. It was a crappy situation and we did the best we could. You saved my sister's life. And for that, I'll spend a few hours with an arrogant werewolf.*

CHAPTER 15

A Matter of Time

ALIA & SHEN

Alia

I was regretting my words two days later.

That imperial eyebrow was raised and his eyes were heavy with suspicion—and was that surprise?—as I showed up at the meeting place near the docks, where the scent of dead fish filled the air. I didn't know how a werewolf could handle it when it made me wanna barf.

"*You* are what Doc sent?" he said, looking me up and down.

I crossed my arms and tapped my foot. "You mustn't sound too excited," I said, saccharine sweet. He opened his mouth, but I cut him off. "I'm not pleased to be here, either, thanks. Let's just get whatever is going on here done, then we never have to see each other again."

He stood stock still and didn't even breathe, as if my very smell annoyed him. With the fishy scent all around, it's frankly insulting that *my* scent broke his nose. Then he released a breath. "There is no time for a replacement."

My hackles rose at his blasé comment. I was more than capable, thanks. I remained silent. Just get through it. Forget the way his arms felt around you. Forget that you were hoping for a warmer greeting. Forget the way you actually wanted him to smile. Just daggum forget it.

After the tiny bit of camaraderie we'd built when I'd saved his life and then he'd cared for me, I was expecting… ahh heck. Just forget it. *You're likely just imagining things, Alia,* I thought to myself.

I would beg to differ, my internal conscience said. Talking to yourself is hard when you have something that'll respond. Did that make me insane?

"What are we doing?" I had to trot to keep up with his long legs. Why'd he have to be born so tall, anyhow?

"You will know when we get there."

"Need to know. Got it. Why'd I need my remedy satchel?"

"Are you going to chatter the entire way?"

"Are you going to be an ungracious lump of fur?"

He stopped. I nearly rammed into his back. He turned to stare at me. Then his lip twitched. "Ungracious lump of fur?"

I huffed, stepping back so I wouldn't have to cram my neck so far to look at the cur. Did I mention he was freakin' tall? "It's what you are, ain't it?"

His lip twitch turned into a tiny smile. And once more, I was slightly awestruck. The guy should smile more. He still looked dangerous as heck, but he also looked handsome. Why'd supernaturals get all the looks?

Grandma said it was to lure unsuspecting humans to their deaths. Thanks, Grandma, for that little tidbit of paranoia.

"I suppose it is," he said, slowly dropping the smile.

"Also, why the heck did you do a complete three-sixty? You were talkative and nearly friendly when I left after—" I paused, unsure if I wanted to remind him.

"Stabbing and kidnapping me? This is the real me. Get used to it." He turned and strode forward. I cursed his blasted long legs.

Shen

She was untouched by the amount of darkness that was my world, and it was my task to ensure it remained so. But my mission to keep her at arm's length did not get along with Alia herself. She was intuitive and direct.

Blasted Doc and his schemes. I asked him to send Fen. My cousin could use some practice after all the training I'd put into the kid.

"Stay beside me," I said. As if it were not obvious she should do so.

"Are you going to gimme any hints?" Her voice still held a wheeze. Was she not well yet? It'd been a week since her sickness. Then again, I had not been around humans enough to know how long sickness stayed. My kind would be well in a day or two from what she went through—if we even got a cold to begin with.

I took a breath before I replied, "Someone of importance was kidnapped. We do not know what shape he or she will be in when we find them."

She stopped. "Wait, this isn't a poisoning mission?"

I could not help the tiny huff of laughter that escaped me. "You really have me pegged as the big bad wolf."

She scrunched up her nose. I booped it. She wiggled it.

A sharp clap of leather pierced my ears a split second before a buzzing filled the air. I grabbed Alia and brought her to my chest, enfolding her in my arms. I turned, and the arrow thudded into my back.

Alia froze. I was surprised I did not have a knife at my kidney or in my stomach for such a move.

"Forgive me. Are you alright?"

"Did you just get shot protecting me *again*?" Her voice held a hint of whine laced with what sounded like concern. "Get your furry butt down so you don't get another—"

Another thud hit my back. "Too late," I said.

Alia's entire face scrunched up, and I was unsure whether she would stab me or cry.

"Get down, idiot," she seethed, grabbing my arm and dragging me behind cover. Another arrow grazed my hood, but did not nick

my skin. I was unconcerned about the arrows, unlike Alia.

She stuck her head around the corner at knee level. I grabbed her by the hood and reeled her back behind cover. She squawked and huffed and glared, her hood and hair askew. "Do not dare get yourself killed after I worked so hard to ensure you lived," I growled.

A blade pricked my chin before I could blink. "I'm a warrior. I know what I'm doing. I survived a long time before you came along, and I'll survive long after."

I gave a shallow nod in acceptance of her words and she sheathed the blade.

The harsh truth of her words sliced me deeper than a stiletto.

"You are right," I said.

She glanced up at me with confusion marring her brow, then nodded. I did not mean for my voice to be gruff, but the reminder of our situations made my chest clench, as much as I tried to ignore it.

She stuck her head around the corner, and I gritted my teeth to keep from reaching out again. "Two rooftops over. Single archer."

She pulled out her spit wad device that she used to consistently poison me. My feet stepped back without the consent of my brain. Wolfsbane was painful, regardless of the resistance I had built.

Alia did not glance at me. She loaded the end with a suspicious-looking ball of haze. She blew on one end and the orb popped out the other side.

"What is a little spit wad—"

A tiny explosion made my brows raise. Smoke rose from where it impacted the cobblestones, providing a screen for us.

"Care to lead through what my little spit wad can do, your majesty?" she said with a low bow and flourish.

I huffed and walked around the corner, trying not to sneeze and give away our position. It smelled of garlic breath. I liked garlic, just not after it had been ingested.

Alia trotted at my heels. "We need to get those arrows out," she said.

"They will need to be cut out."

"Why—oh," she said, realizing that my skin would have healed around them. "Then let me cut them out, at least. You look like a

very sad porcupine."

I hid a smile. "Fine."

We found an out-of-the-way alcove where I could still watch the road leading to where we came from. Road may have been a bit of a stretch. It was a back alley barely large enough for two horses abreast and stank of refuse thrown from the stories above.

She quickly snapped the arrows just above the skin, her fingers sure yet gentle. "Are you sure I can't take them out? I'll be quick."

I glanced over my shoulder. Her big blue eyes danced with compassion in the moonlight, causing them to light with hints of silver and burnt bronze. The two arrowheads were burning the muscles beneath my skin. I worried—

"I'll be fast," she repeated. Her breath washed over me, smelling of peppermint and lilac and a bit of yeasty bread. I glanced away. With her eyes so imploring, there was no way I could say no.

I gave a curt nod.

She was as good as her word. Two quick slices on either side of the broad heads and they were out with tiny slurps.

"Done that before, have you?" I said, rolling my shoulders as the skin itched while piecing itself back together. Warm blood dribbled down my back, caught by my dark tunic where Alia had not sliced through it to get at the arrows.

"Perhaps," Alia said almost absentmindedly, slathering an ointment on the wounds which dulled the pinching pain while it finished healing. I glanced back to see her eyes concentrated on the wounds, her bottom lip caught between her teeth.

"Stay still, you're reopening the wounds," she said, tossing a glare up at me.

I turned back around.

"We need to go," I said.

"But you aren't healed—"

"They will heal. We have a mission."

She packed her satchel.

"Any further guards I should know about?" Alia asked, her voice light.

"There are four guarding the door: two elves and two mages."

"Black magic?"

I nodded, then realized she could not see me properly. "Yes."

"Capabilities?"

"Vine wielder and fire."

"Anything else?"

I paused. "You do not have to come along. I can handle it."

"Doc sent me for a reason. And he saved—" She cut off, but not before I heard the way her voice changed. I smelled a hint of salt in the air that was too sweet to be of the ocean. "I owe him. And I'm not going to run from a few mages."

"And elves."

She huffed out a breath. "That too."

"The spit wad was… good," I said.

"Do you always choke on your compliments?" she asked.

She was a little ball of fire tonight. But I still heard the catch in her voice when she spoke of owing Doc. It was likely a family member or her unicorn. She had spoken of her sister being unwell… hmm.

I would research it later. From my contacts, I knew the Red's village likely lay just beyond Dragon Falls. A visit would take care of my curiosity.

For now, we had a being to rescue.

Sure, it was likely only our mission because Mother wanted to have someone owe her a favor, but at least a kid would be safe.

These were one of few missions I actually enjoyed.

Alia

"Forgive me for grabbing you earlier. I am sorry."

I glanced up at him with squinted eyes. "Why are you apologizing for saving my life?"

His steps paused slightly. Did he look uncomfortable? Surely not. He just dove through the gas Ran called dead demonspawn as if he were strolling in the park. “You do not like being touched without permission.”

I scrunched up my nose and then smoothed it before he could see. “Just because I don’t like to be touched doesn’t mean you didn’t save my life.”

“Did I detect gratefulness in that sentence?” he asked, walking forward and casually strolling to crouch beside a massive amount of stinking trash. I crouched down beside him just in time to see a patrol of two elves. Their pointy ears and purple eyes gave them away. They were twisty, turny creatures I didn’t like to mess with much.

“What are they doing away from the door?” I whispered. “Wait, it’s because of what we did with the sentry, right?”

“I am too lazy to fight unless there is a good reason.”

“So, the plan is to sneak?” I asked, my heart pattering with excitement.

A gleam of mischief entered those dark eyes as his lips twitched into a smirk. “You good with that, Little Red?”

“Heck yes.”

CHAPTER 16

Dark Magic

ALIA & SHEN

Alia

The building in question was a plain, two-story thing that blended in with the the row of gray and tan buildings crusted in salt and grime. There were quite a few people running around, going home from the docks after a long day fishing, clamming, building, or whatever else they were doing.

There were two people in front of the doors, one with a dark hood that I couldn't see beneath, and the other lounging against the top step with blue-green hair.

"What's the plan?" I asked.

"The two left will not leave the post. They have two shifters up top to sniff out any inconsistencies—"

"Which is the reason Doc sent this," I said, pulling out a vial of what I called no-smell-em.

"Precisely. Care to give a bit of a distraction?"

I stared at the two mages. A slow smile crossed my face. "I'll give you a distraction. You have two pes and a boot?"

Shen

She worked quickly. She pulled a strange substance from her cloak—how much did that cloak hold?—and stuffed it in my boot.

"The thing about dark mages is how they connect to Source," she mumbled as I stood, half-watching her work and half-watching the pathway where the elves will return.

I could have easily dispatched the two dark mages. It was my plan, in fact. But I did not want Alia to see me like that yet. She would. She would see the darkness inside me. I could not bear her eyes being shaded with horror and fear as they had been in the beginning. She no longer jumped for a blade when I moved, and I wanted to keep it that way for reasons I did not wish to explore too deeply.

So I gave her an option she did not entirely know she had.

And it had the added benefit of bringing out a side I did not know was buried beneath the warrior shell. The more I learned about her, the more I realized she wore strength like armor.

"They connect through a twisted pathway which can be disrupted. And these two need blood to continue practicing, so they are weakened right now." She added two copper pes to the boot. She counted softly to three and then threw the boot into the street.

She covered her ears.

I did not react in time. The sound was a mix between a screech and glass shattering.

She got up and dusted off, sending me a tiny smirk as I opened and closed my jaw, trying to restore my hearing by popping my ears.

She strolled up the street, pulling her cowl up as she went. "Hey guys, heard there was a kidnapping happening around these parts. Couldn't pass up a good fight."

The two mages exchanged glances. One had their hand on a blade at their waist, and the other leaned casually against a wall, though her eyes were scanning and her coiled muscles were ready to pounce.

“Who are you?” one asked, raising his hands as if to keep us from coming closer. The girl stayed slouched against the wall, ever watchful.

“Just a friendly neighborhood Red,” she said.

The girl straightened. “You aren’t wearing the Red Hood,” she said, squinting.

“Wanna test it?”

“Not really,” the guy said. “But we ain’t got a choice.”

Alia cocked her head. In that moment, she exuded a magnetism I do not think she realized she held. “There’s always a choice. It may be between two crappy decisions, but there’s always a choice. And who knows, maybe neither one of you has access to Source.”

The man muttered “Pechin’ Reds” beneath his breath and then froze.

No wonder Reds were so very feared. I’d heard Reds could also separate the shifter from their wolf. I had not put much thought into that old tale until now.

“You two have a choice. I send you packing with a few well-placed punches to make it look like you gave a fight, or my friend here could feed your blood to the earth. Either way, doesn’t make a difference to me.” Alia shrugged, picking dirt from beneath her fingernails with a blade.

I stepped forward, allowing my fangs to show from beneath my hood and a fierce growl to erupt from my throat.

The man took a step back.

“Alright, we don’t want no troubles,” he said, keeping his hands up and off his blade. Smart man.

“You two wanna punch each other?” Alia asked, rather politely.

The woman groaned. “My last black eye just healed,” she groaned.

“Wasn’t that the fifth one in a row?”

She glared at the man.

It pleased me that Alia was along to prevent a slaughter. Did not take much to realize these two were not a bad sort, they were just pawns in a greater scheme. Just like me, although much more innocent than I.

They slugged each other. Alia blew a dart which hit one in the shoulder and the other just above the collarbone. They went down in a heap.

"Well d—"

Displaced air at my back was the only warning.

Alia

I TURNED TO SHEN, expecting to see a tiny glimmer of a smirk. Instead, I saw a massive form behind him a split second before a sword came down, glimmering in the scant light.

Shen *moved*.

As in, I've never seen someone or something move that quickly. He was a blur, dodging what should've been certain death. His body twisted, and before I shouted a warning, he had the figure on the ground and a blade at the figure's throat.

"Look away," he growled, but I couldn't. I watched as he slit the elf's throat.

He stood with his eyes glowing, and in that moment I saw his darkness. I saw the animal beneath the man.

And it terrified me.

He put the still blood-slicked knife in his fingers point first and threw. I felt the wind off the blade as it sailed past my ear and landed with a meaty thwack just behind me. A grunt and a thud sounded immediately after, but I could not take my eyes off the predator before me.

He was protecting me now. Yet what if the one who held his leash pitted him against me or my family? I didn't know who would win.

My blood chilled in my veins even as I felt the dying need of the elf behind me.

A different *need* slipped past my barriers and branded itself against my soul. I tried to hide the wince. After two consecutive deaths slicing into my soul, this *need* felt too much like continuously dipping a gash into ale.

I glanced back at the two mages where the *need* originated from. It was unusual in that it was linked to safety and tinged with unease. It being *this* sharp meant it was a life-or-death situation.

My Gift didn't work like that, though. It told me when someone was in pain or in *need*, but it wasn't clairvoyant.

The zing of an arrow met my ears. I dove for cover, but I wasn't the target. The arrow pierced the male mage. Rage thawed the ice in my veins until my heart pounded fire through my body. They would kill an already subdued individual? Why?

I loaded a glass ball into my blow gun.

"Close your eyes!" I shouted.

Then I blew. The light which flashed nearly blinded me even though I'd turned and covered my eyes with my hood. I blinked away bright spots and dove for the mages.

Shen was at my side, pulling me inside the door.

"Them first!" I shouted.

He grunted, staring down at me with emotionless eyes. Then he hoisted one mage over his shoulder and dragged the other by the tunic.

When we got them inside, he unceremoniously dumped them.

I looked at the one with the arrow through the heart. There was nothing to be done for him. But the woman, she still lived.

Half the *need* abruptly stopped pulsing. It was as much a sorrow as a relief. I choked on a sob. It felt as if I'd killed him by my own hand.

"Get it together," I whispered to myself. "The other still lives."

I didn't know what to do. The archer was still out there—

"We'll bring her."

I turned to find Shen had already grabbed her and put her over his shoulder once more. The single nod I gave couldn't convey my surprise.

We ran down the passage, my footsteps reverberating, Shen's nearly silent. There were paintings on the walls depicting old men in wigs from a time before the king and princes came to power for each magical and unmagical kind.

A figure suddenly stepped out into the hallway.

Dressed in a red cloak.

CHAPTER 17

Leap of Faith

ALIA

"A Red and a werewolf. Never thought I'd see the day."

Though his voice was familiar, I couldn't place it. I chose not to speak. Until I recognized him, I sure as heck was not letting him recognize me. If someone in my tribe knew about this little side quest, all Sixth would break loose.

Shen dropped the dark mage. I winced. He could've done that a little gentler.

"Not talking, hmm? Traitor doesn't wish to be found out, I see."

"And what would you call yourself?" Shen asked, surprising me.

The Red barked out a laugh. "*Am* I a traitor? Or am I under the orders of my mistress?" His voice was infused with confidence.

I tensed. Was it possible Grandma had sanctioned this? She was the one who told me never to trust a creature of magic. Taught me everything I knew about how to kill one. Why would she be working with kidnappers and mages?

"You don't believe me? Why should you—"

"Can I kill him now?" Shen asked.

The Red squawked in outrage. "I am working with the matriarch to provide a better world. She has told me of her plans and gave me leave to prepare the world for her reckoning—"

"I'd prefer you didn't just yet," I whispered beneath my breath.

Shen sighed as if that was a substantial burden. "Then can I knock him unconscious? He talks too much."

"*Hey—"* Shen took a single step at the Red, who moved back. "Don't you know what I am?" the Red hissed.

Shen took another step, mirrored by the Red. "Know. Do not care," Shen said with a shrug.

The Red yelped when Shen blurred. The Red tripped over his own feet and went down, barely missing Shen's claws. He rolled over his left shoulder in a reverse somersault and threw a glass bottle down. The odor of wolfbane filled the air. Shen sneezed and the Red barely avoided his grasping claws for the second time. The Red sprinted down the passageway, moving quite fast.

Shen continued sneezing. It was the sneeze of a kitten when it gets pollen in its nose.

I grabbed his tunic and drew him up the passageway, away from the bomb. His eyes were watering and he was still sneezing. "Here." I drew two vials from beneath my hood. "Open your mouth."

"Kind of—*sneeze, sneeze, sneeze,*—hard," he panted.

"You can still sneeze while I stick these under your tongue."

He opened his mouth and I stuck the drops under his tongue. He sneezed on my hand, but I didn't mind.

"So—*sneeze*—rry," he said.

"You know we need to hurry this up, right?" I said as his sneezes calmed.

"You—*sneeze*—were the one who insisted on saving the black mage's life."

"You aren't wrong, but we've been…" I couldn't figure out the word for it.

He straightened, wiping his nose. He looked a lot less dangerous when his eyes were red and watery and his nose was red as an Ambrose scar. "Enjoying ourselves while delaying the inevitable?"

A crooked grin crossed my face that he couldn't see beneath my cowl. "Yeah. That. But soon there will be backup and I don't fancy fighting our way out of this place."

He nodded, and in that moment he went from playful to… I didn't know what to call it. But it was as if the emotions, scant as they were, was sucked out of his very being.

"It has been fun, Little Red," he said, sticking out his hand.

“Same here, Wolfie,” I said, shaking it.

A tiny smile crossed his face and then vanished as if it never happened.

He turned and the fun was gone. It was time to rescue a kidnapee.

Shen picked up the mage, and we ran. It was a race against time to get to the kidnapped person before the cavalry arrived. Shen sniffed the air. I squeaked when he grabbed the back of my tunic to drag us into an alcove while five mages raced past. A few had lightning twirling up their arms. Fun.

We continued up the passageway until he opened a door into a room with cobwebs and sheet-covered furniture. He laid the mage down on the bed and a poof of dust went up. He walked to the window.

“Are you going to do what I think you’re going to do?” I whispered.

He didn’t answer, but we both knew he was going to do exactly what I thought he was going to do.

“Stay here,” he said.

“Why?”

He paused. “Because I can climb faster and easier with my claws.”

“How do you know?”

He opened and closed his mouth. Then he sighed. “You may not like what I must do in that room.”

“Don’t leave me behind because darkness is knocking. That’s when you need help the most.”

He gave a quick nod and climbed out the window. I followed close behind him, carefully slipping out to the eaves and then hopping to the next one. He pointed to the next window over. I nodded. He hopped with the grace of a mountain goat to the last window. I leapt to the next window. It creaked beneath me, sending my heart fluttering in my chest. I leapt again before it gave.

I clung to the wall and tried to ignore the black void that lasted for at least three stories beneath me. A tiny squeal escaped me as the wood gave way beneath my feet and plunged me into darkness.

Shen grabbed my arm. “I have you.” He hauled me up to the window beside him.

“Thanks,” I said, my heart attempting to bruise my ribs.

“No need to mention it.”

He popped open the window and eased inside. Red splattered the wall as a gurgle came from his victim. The *need* cut off abruptly, making me wince.

I stepped in behind Shen, and there, tied to a silver chain nailed into the wall, was a black-eyed, blue-haired nymph.

I blinked and blinked again.

“Did you know?” I whispered.

Shen shook his head. The nymph curled against the wall away from us, his skin red and peeling. My heart ached for the little guy.

“How do you treat a nymph?” I whispered to myself.

“You were the one who knew what to do last time,” Shen replied.

“I was going off of instinct!”

“Then trust yourself. Your instincts are there for a reason.”

I speared him with a glare and huffed. He was right. I crouched down. “Hey there. We’re here to get you to safety, ok?”

The nymph hissed. Whelp, that instinct didn’t work.

Then I felt the *need*. His soul was crying for a connection to water. I offered the waterskin from my pouch. Though he guzzled it, the water wasn’t enough. He *needed* water that was connected to the earth.

“He needs water, but not this. Where is the closest passageway connected to the ocean?” I asked.

“The sewers.”

I nodded.

“Hey, I met one of your kind not too long ago. She had long, blue hair much like yours. She was deep in a cavern—”

The nymph darted forward, reaching out and grasping my hand. Water curled like claws, piercing my skin. “You hurt?” he snarled, showing his teeth.

I kept very still, even as I felt blood dribble down from the punctures he’d created in my skin. “No, sweet one. I did not hurt her nor your siblings. They are safe.”

He blinked up at me, his eyes slowly reversing color to become the blue of his mother's. "They ok?"

"They're fine. But we won't be if we don't get you out of here."

He nodded. I turned to Shen, who was already working on the chain. Unlike him and my brother, I couldn't pick locks. Wasn't one of my specialties.

We froze as footsteps creaked outside the door. Lamplight passed beneath the frame. "Anything?" a voice asked.

"They said there are two who've come for the product. So far, they're still at large. Stay at your posts."

"Yes, sir," two voices said.

The footsteps retreated. I breathed out.

The door opened, allowing bright orange light to enter the room.

"Your evening meal—" The guard's eyes widened as he saw us. "Intrud—" He cut off when Shen's blade caught him in the throat. He went down, but there was another behind him.

"Get the nymph," I said, running to the door. The other guard was there. He brought up a hand, sending lightning at me. I grabbed my cloak and wrapped it around myself, using it as a shield. Static shocked me a bit, but the cloak absorbed most of it.

Between strikes—even lightning users have limits—I dove forward, taking his feet out from under him. He went down with a yelp of pain as his ankle popped. I punched his throat, making him gasp for air so he couldn't think about lighting me up like some sort of shish kebab. I rolled him over, snaking my arm around his neck, and it was nighty-night for the dude.

More footsteps pounded outside the door. I shut it and put a wobbly, wooden chair beneath the handle. It wouldn't hold for long.

Shen had the nymph free and riding on his back as he darted out the window.

I followed him out, wondering too late how the heck I was going to get back across. Shen was using his claws to gouge out the pure rock face, but I wouldn't be able to scale it before—

The door crashed open at my back just as Shen reached the window eave.

"Jump!"

I jumped.

CHAPTER 18

Trust

SHEN

She listened.

Nearly before I was ready, she had leapt out the window, arm outstretched. I grabbed it and used her momentum to send her around me and through the open window. She rolled when she landed, coming up and breathing hard. "We gotta move," she said.

"Hold tight," I whispered to the nymph. He held tighter to my neck, his skin slimy yet crusty. A very disconcerting texture.

The mage was still in the room when I arrived, and her eyes were open.

"What happened—" Her vision cleared when she saw us. "You?"

"Your friend is dead, killed by your own. Your choice is to come with us and live or stay and die," I said.

Alia glared at me, but this was not the time to mince words.

"He's a little rough around the edges. You get used to it. Kinda. I'm sorry about your friend, but you really need to come with us, ok?" Alia held out her hand.

"I have my powers back. I could turn you over," she said.

"We do not have time for this," I said.

Alia sent me a look that told me to shut up. "You could, but you won't."

"Why wouldn't I?" the mage asked, her face tensing.

"Because you need more than what they can provide."

The mage blinked as if not expecting that. Alia had a way of saying things that meant no sense to the average person, but had a connection to an individual that struck their soul.

The mage nodded and followed us out the door. A yell rang out behind us, and I threw a blade as a guard rounded the corner, arrow cocked. The blade sunk into his shoulder, making his arrow thwack into the wall beside the mage.

Alia darted downstairs and then took a right instead of a left.

"The outside is—" I cut myself off and hid a smile as I realized where she was headed.

She smiled at me, eyes crinkling.

"What coocoo pot did I manage to emerge in?" the mage muttered. She followed us down the steps and into the cellar. Alia turned to the nymph, gesturing for me to set him down.

"Can you sense the water?" she asked.

He held out his hand. His eyes turned black and hope showed in the way he eagerly stretched forward. Then he slumped and shook his head. "No," he sighed.

Alia's shoulders deflated. "We have to go back—"

Footsteps pounded down the stairs. I turned to stand between the black mages coming down those steps and my little motley crew, but I counted at least twenty different footfalls and heard more further up. "We cannot go up," I said.

My hands curled into claws as the first mage rounded the corner. A fireball shot from his hand. I used my cloak to absorb the worst of the heat, not dodging for fear it would hit those behind me. I lunged to meet him, slicing his throat before he threw another flame.

"Please don't kill them!" Alia yelled.

I grumbled under my breath, grabbed the next mage by the throat, and tossed him up the stairs at another.

"Even I cannot handle this many without killing. Get us a way out of here!"

"I can't—"

"I do not wish to hear those words uttered again, Little Red. Believe in yourself." An elf stabbed under my guard, and I threw him

at a mage who was about to zap someone in the area behind me. They went down in a tangled mass of limbs.

I heard the trickle of water. It started as a slow drip then slowly turned into a whirlpool.

"Duck!" Alia yelled. I dropped into a crouch, getting a knee to the face for my efforts.

A tiny orb sailed over my face and landed in the midst of four mages, two dark elves, and a werewolf. I covered my eyes and ears just in time for a bright flash of light.

I was up before the rest of them and found a massive hole in the earth where the nymph and mage had been a moment before. Alia saluted me and jumped into the hole.

I grumbled about idiotic, trusting Reds and leapt in after her.

The blackness sucked me in. Took me back to a place I promised myself to never return. As I was falling, a part of me felt the walls closing in around me. My arms felt the sides of the tiny stone cell where I had been left for hours to contemplate my failures—

My feet hit resistance. Then it gave. Cold water enveloped me. It shocked me back to the present as I clawed at the water spinning around me. There was no water in the punishment cave. Only cold rock.

That did not mean I would survive this.

Water burned down my throat as my body craved air. My head broke the surface and the water spat me out on a sandy shore. It was pitch black. Some assume werewolves can see in the dark. We can. But even we cannot see where there is no light.

Something glowed. I blinked quickly. It was an eerie yellow-green. Then I smelled Alia. Her face appeared next as my eyes adjusted to the scant light. The mage was a wet bundle of disgruntlement while the nymph was playing in the water, splashing and smiling, a gentle song with an ethereal quality to it coming from him.

My original instructions were to bring the captive to Mother, but there were no detailed instructions besides that. She was beyond her Command limit for the month, so I did not *have* to do anything.

Surely, when I accidentally lose the creature during our escape, it would not be much of a problem. I had done worse.

"Where are we?" the mage asked.

“Underground water-source," said a voice which was layered with other voices—the nymph. He sounded much stronger.

Another glow began.

A turquoise-haired nymph emerged from the waters, the gold scrolling on her forehead alight as her eyes locked onto the nymph we had rescued. A song washed over us. A song of longing. Of joy. Of such hope, it was nearly painful.

The song intertwined with the song of the child nymph we had rescued. A splash erupted from the water as the child jumped into his mother’s arms, his keening so like a pup's whine my chest clenched. The mother enfolded him into her arms, her hair swaying in the air as if they were still under the black waters.

A blue circle lit up around the nymphs and extended to the surrounding waters, clearing the sewage from the waters and making it clear as the south sea.

"Source heard my pleas, and sent you to bring home my child, just as was asked. You two will be blessed of the very Life-Source of this world. Thank you.” It was the nymph Alia had consoled after she saved Fenbutt’s life by nearly killing herself.

The nymph rose to the water surface. Her seaweed-esque dress went down to her knees. Fins emerged from either side of her calves, and her feet had webbing in between the toes. She knelt before Alia, the mage, and me, bowing her head.

Alia caught her shoulder, lifting her up with a gentle, joy-filled smile. The mother's eyes were wide as she glanced up at Alia. "We are grateful it was us. Go help him heal from this, and live a good life.”

The nymph reached out a hand and touched Alia's cheek. "My name is Ahhanhi," the nymph said.

My entire being froze. Nymph names were regarded as a precious honor, given only to those who are considered allies of their kind.

Alia now had the might of a nymph army at her back. Though she was the one person who would never use it. Nor did she even *know* it.

Alia's smile softened as the nymph child peeled himself from his mother and plastered himself to Alia.

"Name Ahhirian," he said, his voice no longer weak and his lips no longer cracked. His wide eyes stared up at his rescuer with reverence.

"It's nice to meet you, Ahhanhi and Ahhirian," Alia said. The child nymph smiled at the way her voice mispronounced the rolling vowels, almost as if they were a sound her vocals could not replicate. "I'm Alia."

"Alia and Shen, friend of nymphs, should you ever have a drastic need, call my name," Ahhanhi said.

Alia nodded. "Thank you, Ahhanhi. You have honored us."

"No, human knower of the dissenters, it is you who have honored us. You will be remembered. You can heal your broken soul, human knower of needs. You need not only meet others where they are broken when you also have the power within you to heal yourself. And you, Alpha of werewolves, must not reach to the past for the future's answers. You need only speak to your soul. And last, you, little mage who is hiding."

The dark mage had tried to avoid the nymphs, but came forward at Ahhanhi's insistence. "You no longer need to supplement your Gift to help your family. This will be all you shall need."

From the water emerged a waterspout about the size of a bird. It landed in the mage's outstretched hands. When the water drained away, she was left with a simple, spiral pendent necklace.

"Go, and look to the dark no more for your answers."

The mage stared back and forth between us all before darting into another passageway, the necklace still glowing.

"Would you two wish to be taken elsewhere?" Ahhanhi asked.

"Can you drop us out at the ocean?" Alia asked, nearly bouncing with glee.

At the thought of another ride on the roiling waters of a nymph's powers, I nearly lost what was left of my breakfast.

CHAPTER 19

Purpose

ALIA

That was eventful.

"Yes. And now I never have to see the werewolf again."

Ran snorted, shaking her glorious mane. *Mhmm.*

"Seriously. He's a pain in the boot. One of those in the sole that you can't quite get out and was built in so it constantly gives you bruises, ya know?"

Mhmm, she said again. *Did he say anything about the puppy?*

A grin crossed my face. "I thought you didn't like the puppy."

I don't.

"Mhmm. He mentioned Fenbutt."

She picked up her pace for a few steps and then stopped abruptly. I nearly sailed over her head into the water, but I buckled down.

A laugh bubbled from my lips. "Fine, fine. He said Fenbutt is staying with a friend and doing well. He has other pups to play with and is happy."

I don't tell her about the escape attempts.

Heard that.

It's super amazing to have a pony who reads minds.

Why don't we bring him home?

I froze as she trotted through the trees, nearly bruising my tail end as it bounced against the saddle. "Do you miss the little guy?"

Of course not!

Wow. She was getting soft.

Am not, she said petulantly. She smacked me on the foot with her tail.

Doc's words were going round in my mind the next day as I helped Dad with chores around the house.

Stress. Can that really cause something so horrible?

"Do you think someone can cause someone else to get sick?" I asked.

Dad paused in washing a large pot. I was sharpening my knives in between drying the pans and plates. "I don't know. Never thought about it, to be honest. What makes you ask?"

I avoided his eyes. "Just something I heard."

He grunted. He knew there were things I couldn't share because of missions. "I understand. I've heard of older warriors becoming physically ill because of battle trauma. But I don't know if someone can make another sick. Is this in relation to your sister?"

I glanced up to find his eyes on me. I gave a slight nod. "When did she begin getting sick?" I asked.

"You were there. It was about a year after Fina's birth, though she showed signs of sickness much earlier."

"Why do you think she got sick?"

He scrubbed the pan with extra vigor. "I don't know. I'm no healer," he said, his voice hard and unyielding. He paused, shoulders slumping. "Sorry, kiddo. I didn't mean to yell. I just want my baby girl well and happy."

I touched his arm, knowing he *needs* comfort. "Dad, you're doing the best you can. You're an amazing father."

"An amazing father wouldn't have a sick baby girl," he said, almost under his breath.

I shook my head. "Terrible dads have healthy kids. Terrible dads have unhealthy kids. The sun shines on both the good dads and the

bad ones. Rain also comes to both. Do you really think you're so special as to control who gets sick or who doesn't?"

Dad stared at me for a moment. Then he cracked a tiny smile and ruffled my hair. I batted him off and undid the braid of my dark hair that he'd messed up.

"When did you grow up into a woman, kiddo?" he asked, smiling before going back to washing.

I returned his smile, though I was thinking I hadn't been a kid in a very long time.

"I HEARD you speaking with your father," Mom said as I returned inside. She was changing Fina's diaper. I felt her *need* and grabbed a clean washcloth from the kitchen and handed it to her just as she opened the cloth. She jerked back with a frown as Fina giggled.

I stifled a smile and a gag. "Glad that one's yours," I said.

Mom shot me a look. "Get your hinny back to sweeping before I give this one to ya," she said. I quickly grabbed the broom and swept up the rushes. "And thanks for the wipes!" she said, still frowning.

I nearly laughed. "You're welcome."

"I heard what you said to Dad," Mom repeated.

I shrugged. "Yeah, it was a stupid idea—"

She shook her head. "No, hon. I've thought the same thing before."

I stared at her, forgetting all about the rushes at my feet. "What? Why haven't you mentioned it?"

She shrugged. "I did. Nobody believed me. So I stopped mentioning it."

I tried to get my mind around that. Mom was a bit… I didn't know how to describe her. I think she had a Gift, but it was super spotty and difficult to pinpoint. It was often around the things that

were bad, too, so people didn't like to listen to her because she was nearly always the bearer of bad news.

"I believe you. Can you tell me?" I asked, feeling her *need* to be heard and understood.

She finished replacing the new cloth and throwing the old into a basket before she turned to me with Fina on her hip. Fina stuck a finger up Mom's nose, making her sputter. Fina giggled.

I tried not to grin.

Mom frowned down at the girl, but then she smiled and tickled her feet.

"Your sister was never the strongest, but she was never sickly. Not until she went through a period where we didn't hear from her very much. We thought she was just enjoying her new life away from home and loving on her children. But then she came over one night, pregnant and pale, Jess in her arms. She said Rey had told her she was a lying"—Mom glanced down at sweet Fina in consideration—"you-know-what and sent her away. She always tried to smile when I asked her if Rey was treating her right, and she'd say yes, but I saw something different beneath her haunted eyes. I suspected the stress was getting to her. Then she almost lost this little one." She snuggled Fina closer. "I suspected, but could never prove it."

I felt a need then. It was odd—almost as if it were a *need* linked to two separate individuals. Two who *needed* to be together. Whelp, that was a decently easy fix. "Then why don't we bring her here?" I asked.

Mom stared at me. "That—is a wonderful idea. Why didn't I think of that?"

I squeezed her arm. "Mom, we're all running on empty. We originally couldn't keep her here because of everything going on, but I'm here more now. I can help. Let's bring Anna home."

CHAPTER 20

Reckoning

SHEN

Mother was not happy.

"You let him leave? Do you need more assistance learning the meaning of an Alpha's words?"

"No, Mother. He merely escaped."

Her eyes grew golden. She stood. Beatrice settled back in her gold-tinted glass chair, her eyes showing a hint of glee.

"You know the rules around Alpha Command as well as anyone, my son. There can only be so much power exchanged within a month's time. My last Command was completed a week past. But you understand there are other ways to enforce my words, do you not?"

I used a small tool behind my back to pinch the sensitive skin of a finger to prevent my heart rate from betraying me. She would be deposed soon if my contacts came through. I signed away my right as heir, but the pack would have an Alpha who would care for them. That was all that mattered.

"The little menagerie of those who were cast out. I wonder where they went?" Cold flushed through my bones at her words. It was a challenge to keep the growl in my chest. "The boy you took under your tutelage. Your dear cousin. He was with them, no? What a shame how hard it is for him to shift since he was once under the Red's *care*. At least now he has a purpose in caring for the castoffs. Perhaps he won't attempt to take his life once more."

I maintained an emotionless mien even as Lycus edged forward. I worried he would be seen in my eyes, so I looked away and kept my gaze on the ground.

"Do not test me," Mother said, her power washing over me.

I bowed my head and presented my neck. "Yes, Alpha."

She waved her hand.

I strode out of the massive hall without a backward glance.

As soon as I escaped into the cool night air, the suppressed growl burst from my chest and ripped into the stillness of the night. A fox shot out from a burrow and a mass of crows cawed as they scattered from a tree.

When my feet touched the soft loam of the forest surrounding the huge city, Lycus exploded. I landed on four feet instead of two. We pounded through the trees, hoping we were not too late.

A LIGHT GLOW brushed the dark sky as I topped the hill just outside Doc's land. My heart pounded in time to my feet as Lycus pushed us faster, our feet flying over the loam into the swaying winter grasses which Doc had just planted for his animals.

My ears pricked up when a scream abruptly cut off. Doc's massive barn cracked and shot sparks into the night sky as a fire devoured its insides, making it glow like a massive furnace.

It was close to toppling when Doc's mate, Madame Vika, came running from within, a girl not older than four clinging to her skirts.

Her eyes saw me and they widened with hope. "There is another in the loft—I couldna—"

I did not wait for her to finish. I leapt through the door. A beam fell, and I dodged to the side, just avoiding being crushed. A shard snapped up from the impact and tore into my chin. I pawed at the piece and howled when it came out, leaving a hole right beneath my jaw.

I shook off the rest of the debris and stalked further into the barn. Heat beat against my fur. It sought to devour my skin and melt the fat from my bones. I ignored the pain and squinted to see beyond the tears streaming from my eyes as the smoke stung them.

"Help!" cried a tiny voice.

I shifted to human. It was the only way to climb the ladder. The fire roared with the strength of a dozen dragons. The flames leapt at me and caught my fingers and parts of my legs before I jumped from the ladder and rolled to put out my tunic.

"Where are you?" I called, choking off into hacking coughs as I searched the area for the little one. Doc stored his old medical stuff up here; I saw the old chairs and tables and some remedies, but not the child. I strained my ears to hear anything beyond the crackle of flames.

There.

A tiny breath catching as if in a sob.

I peered around a table to find a small boy curled up under a desk. His eyes were wide as he stared up at me. "Come with me, little one. Let me get you to safety," I said, holding out my hand.

The boy's dark brown eyes blinked at me before he set his tiny hand in my own. Then he leapt from his hiding place and clung to my neck with the strength of a werewolf. I glanced back in the direction of the ladder; it was no longer a ladder, just two swinging poles being devoured by flames.

I turned to the loft window and kicked it open. The fire sizzled behind me and the floor sagged as creaks of wood foretold what was soon coming.

"Hold tight," I whispered in the boy's ear. He nodded.

I jumped.

Wind screamed past my ears as the barn collapsed behind me.

My knees absorbed most of the shock when we hit the ground. It hurt, but we were alive.

"Sammy!" a voice cried out.

A growl erupted from my lips as a woman ran up to us. She stopped, her pale blue eyes widening. "Please, he's me boy," she pleaded.

I immediately silenced the growl raging in my chest. She took Sammy from my arms. “Thank ya, sir. Thank ya, thank ya,” she said over and over, clinging to her pup as much as he clung to her.

“It was my pleasure—” My voice cut off as I saw a commotion in the trees. My body was quavering with the after-effects of adrenaline and my ears rang as my lungs sucked in greedy gulps of air. I wanted to give Lycus time to heal us before we fought again.

But it was only Matilda, a grin on her face as she sauntered into the clearing with a group of about ten children clinging to her skirts.

“See, I told ye the Alpha would come. He’s a right good sort, he is.”

“I am not the Alpha, Madame,” I said with a slight smile.

A hint of the tangy silver and the timeless echo of loam hit my nose a moment before a dark outline emerged behind Matilda and the children. Instinct sent a cold warning through my veins. I ran.

Matilda saw where my eyes were and she turned. She shoved the children away as a man in black stepped from the edge of the woods.

A sword erupted from Matilda’s back. The objective part of me noted the blade was silver based on the way her werewolf blood sizzled on contact. Lycus howled as fury descended and scorched a blazing pathway through my soul.

The being in black scowled, jerking the sword from her chest.

He had not a chance to move before I dragged a blade across his throat and let his gurgling carcass fall to the ground as I caught Matilda. I gently lowered her to the ground, a low whimper escaping her.

More beings paused as they saw my speed and the flash of my werewolf. My growl built to a crescendo. A whistle sounded from deeper within the trees and they disappeared back into the thicket at the signal for retreat.

Sammy’s mother fell to her knees next to Matilda. “Ma?” she whispered, clinging tightly to Sammy, who had his head buried in his mother’s shoulder.

Fen met my eyes across the clearing. His eyes were dark with promise and edged with a dangerous insanity I knew could come

with his wolven side. “We hunt. Go,” I said.

He nodded and bowed his head, his eyes blazing. No one attacked our pack—no one. He took off into the woods after the beings who were escaping. They would pay.

I pushed back the silver hair from Matilda’s sweaty brow. She was the one who was there from my earliest memories, the grandmother I never had.

The children were ushered off by Madame Vika. Their faces paled upon seeing the blood, a few had tears beading in their eyes and the sharp, bitter scent of grief filled the air with the sweet copper tang of blood.

Matilda looked up at me, her body jerking with pain. She reached up a hand and I grasped it, her daughter silent beside us. “Take care of them, Alpha,” she whispered.

I was no Alpha.

She smiled, blood dribbling from the corner of her lip. “Ya have always been Alpha, my boy.” She paused, her breathing labored as her wolf struggled to heal her, but the silver was too much. “You always looked out for the weakest of us. A true leader, ya is. I only wished I’d be there to see the day ya are free to meet the person ya were always meant to be.”

“I will take care of them,” I vowed, my voice deep with promise.

She patted my cheek. I suppressed the burning behind my eyes.

Matilda turned to her daughter, who was blinking rapidly to hold back the tide of tears. “Darling Daisy, take care of yourself, ya hear? And never forget how much I love ya,” she whispered, her eyes squinting as if she could not make us out any longer.

“Love ya, Ma, always and forever,” Daisy said, her voice strong despite the tears trailing her cheeks.

“We’ll meet again on Seventh, love. I’ll be waiting—” Matilda’s eyes went behind us and widened. I turned, but no one was there. “Harald? Is that truly ye?” Matilda gasped, her voice hoarse with hope as her eyes filled with tears.

Her hand went limp.

Daisy bowed her head to her mother’s chest and wept.

I closed unseeing eyes and kissed Matilda's cheek, fury building in my chest.

A howl called from the trees. Fen had found them. It was time to hunt.

Time to kill.

I stalked off into the woods, rage eclipsing my good sense. Lycus roared in my soul, feeling the loss of her as if she had been the mother he had always needed.

I followed Fen's trail, losing myself in the killing. The pain and fear drove me to the extent of my sanity where I toyed with losing myself to it. Something whispered in my mind, but I did not wish to listen. Here, in this place, I was free. Free of the pain. Free of Commands. Free of anything that could damage my soul.

A hint of sunshine brushed across my nose. I turned, following the scent, and Lycus finally came out to play. Fur sprouted along my arms and my nose elongated until I was on four feet instead of two.

CHAPTER 21

Dishonor

ALIA

The glowing was a bit too close to the tribe for comfort. Grandma sent Graham, Brandt, and me out to see if it were a fire that could possibly become out of control. Freakin' great timing, as Anna was coming home today and I wanted to be there. But nope. I had to go out on mission.

It wasn't until we got closer that I realized *where* the fire was coming from. My chest clenched when I saw Doc's barn in shambles, the fire still rising high in the night air and sending pinpricks of red and gold embers into the dark sky.

There were mostly children and elderly people huddled on the ground, staring at the flames as if in shock. Doc went from one to another, carrying water and remedies with a woman at his back I took to be his mate.

I breathed a silent sigh that they were safe. A woman was bent over a body lying on the ground, her *need* for her dead mother grating against my soul. Most of the remaining *needs* were not life-threatening.

"A large werewolf came through here recently," Graham said when I returned to them, pushing aside brush to reveal a paw print the size of my hand. I stifled a sigh of annoyance.

"We're just here for the fire. Nothing more," I said.

"Shouldn't we make sure the werewolves hurt no one else?" Brandt asked, his eyebrows raising on his forehead.

To say no would go against everything in my tribe. I trailed a fine line of staying within the tribe rules enough to be considered capable and outside enough to deal with my guilty conscience.

My shoulders slumped. I gestured for Graham to lead the way. He was our best tracker.

We found a trail of carnage. Elves—dark elves, by the look of their dark hair and scars in the place of eyebrows—were slain. It was a ruthless, calculated attacked. Most still had surprise in their eyes as they stared up at the sky with slit throats.

The pathway diverged. "You guys take that trail, I'll take this one," I said.

"Is it wise to split up with something like this on the loose?" Brandt asked, his eyes showing a hint of fear.

"Maybe, but I'm not going to risk losing the trail this time."

Understanding dawned in Brandt's eyes. "You think this is the work of Hood?"

"It screams of him. Now go, we can't lose him again," I said.

My heart rate picked up as I followed the trail made by a huge werewolf. A twig crunched beneath my foot and I winced. I hadn't gone a hundred yards when I heard a strangled yell. I quickened my pace.

A bear-sized black werewolf was struggling with an elf. The werewolf had a white-tipped tail. Did it also have white on the haunches? I saw something that could've been, but then the werewolf turned and I lost sight of the white.

It was close enough. It had to be him.

I grinned, not caring that I showed my white teeth. I'd found him. And he was going to be mine this night.

He snarled as he bowled the elf over and snapped his fangs around the elf's throat. He shook and the elf fell lifelessly to the ground at his paws.

I came into the clearing just as he turned from werewolf to man. But it was… painful. The bones broke and rebroke, sometimes reforming into human bones and other times going back to wolf. It was almost as if the wolf and human were fighting for dominance. I couldn't say how long it took, but his harsh breaths filled with air

and a hint of sympathy filled me at his plight. His shoulders were wide beneath the cloak. He turned his head and sniffed.

"Come out," he said, his voice tired. I knew that voice.

"Who are you?" I whispered, standing at the edge of a precipice with no one to save me.

I *knew* him. But he wasn't the one I expected.

He stood and turned slowly with his hands up as if he meant me no harm. I knew better. He was a killer. An assassin.

"You killed my grandpa, prepare to die—" I choked on my words as he turned fully. My blade nearly fell from my hand. "Fen?" I whispered. Shen's friend who acted more like his brother? The one who was all smiles and laughter and looked as if he couldn't hurt a fly? *He* was Hood?

He gave a tired smile and a tiny salute. "Hello again, Miss Alia. Miss me?"

I hissed out a breath. As I looked closer, though, I saw something else beneath the blood and dirt. I saw a boy who was in chains, his eyes hardened at the treatment of the Reds.

"Who are you?" I whispered, horror curdling my gut.

"I am the one you freed that night. And I will ever be in your debt because of it."

"But you killed my grandpa?"

He shook his head, a wince crossing his face. "I'm sorry about your grandpa. Truly."

"Do you still hunt Reds?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Only those who deserve it."

"Why did you not kill me that night?" I finally asked. The night I spoke of was soon after I'd bonded with Ran, and I'd let every single creature held by the Reds for training go because I couldn't handle more pain. He didn't kill me when he had the chance, despite there being every reason to take blood for blood.

Fen ran a hand through his hair, his eyes sad and weary. "There was too much killing. I was done."

I bowed my head. "A life for a life." My voice was hard and unyielding as I told him what would happen when I saw him again. "Go," I hissed out through clenched teeth.

Fen nodded, nearly bowed, then disappeared into the underbrush.

Something rustled in the brush behind me. I turned with blades outstretched. Graham and Brandt stood there with wide eyes, watching where the werewolf had disappeared.

“What have you done?” Graham asked, his voice cracking.

ANNA WAS SETTLED in a bed beside my own. She was smiling, her voice lighter than it had been in a long time. I had to shove back tears. Her fingers still shook with exertion; she couldn’t walk herself to the chamber pot, so she needed it directly at her bedside; and her eyes and cheeks were still sunken—but she was alive. And she was talking.

For months, it was hard for her to speak as her energy ran out even just attempting to pass words from her lips.

Now she was smiling.

A bittersweet joy filled my heart as I watched her, even as I knew what was coming today.

Graham had turned me in for letting Hood get away. He spun it a bit better than what happened, but it was still a terrible failure for the Second Blade. It would bring a public reckoning. I tried not to let what was coming affect this time I had with my sister. My sister who was doing *well.*

"What’re you thinking so hard on, sis?" she asked, looking up from darning my Red hood from where it'd snagged on a rock going down that dratted river.

No heckin' way was I telling her what I was actually thinking, so I just said the first thing that came to mind. "There's a werewolf—" I slapped my hands over my mouth.

Anna stared at me. *"What?"*

I stared back, my cheeks growing warm.

"You... met a werewolf... and you *like* him?"

I groaned, falling back on my straw bed, picking at a mole on my arm with the black-and-silver swirled blade. *His* blade. "No... yes... I don't know!"

"Is he good to you?”

I rolled my head over to stare at her. "Have you lost your ever-loving mind?"

She shrugged, her eyes darting between me and the hood. "Can't say all the killing ever fully set right with me. I wanted to do more to bring honor... but killing..."

I sat up, crossing my legs. "What do you mean, do more?" This was my sister we were talking about. She had first married her childhood crush, built an empire by darning red cloaks—her employees were still making money, but she had to sell out when her sickness came—and she was so strong that a ravaging sickness didn't steal her kindness nor her love. It had changed her, yes, but she was still strong. No other person I knew could've survived what she's come through, and she wanted to do *more*?

"I have done so little for our family's honor. I'm sick. You take care of everyone's needs. Mom and Dad were run ragged trying to support us through this sickness. Jacob babysits and misses Red training to help look after Jess and Fin. What do I do? Sit around and darn dragon's breath *cloaks*." She slapped my Red hood, her breath coming in sharp gasps.

I walked over and sat beside her. "I feel the same way," I said, twirling a thread from my tunic.

She side-eyed me. "You?"

I chuckled. “You don't have to sound so dratted doubtful. I feel like if I were better, Grandma would’ve already chosen me as heir. Instead, I'm being called before the Reds today to see if I’m to be punished for not bringing back Hood's head."

"There’s no reason to stab an already dead werewolf," she said.

Part of me agreed with her. It was a saying that meant let the past lay where it would. I shrugged. "But still. You created an empire. You gave birth to two adorable little baby girls and raised them *while* you were unwell. You have survived something horrendous. What have I done? I can kill things really well."

Anna snorted a laugh. "Maybe everyone's pains and fears are just that... pains and fears."

I shrugged. "Maybe. But I get it. Seriously. I have a feeling you'll find your purpose. For now, know that it's coming and sometimes breaking out of a cocoon takes time. But you'll find your wings, sis. I know it. I can feel it, in here," I whispered, patting my heart.

Anna's eyes grew misty. She put her forehead to mine. "We both will, little sis. We both will."

CHAPTER 22

The Mark

ALIA & SHEN

Alia

"Go on patrol, Red. Keep your hands outta trouble, Red," I mocked under my breath. Nothing out here, from the soft sigh of wind brushing her fingers through the leaves to the piercing cry of ravens and crows, could hear me. I kept my voice down, anyway. Grandma had eyes and ears everywhere.

Grandma had always been… different. Where Mom and Dad showered their kids with all they could afford and spent time training us in the ways of battle and survival, Grandma threw you headfirst in a river and told you to swim. And with her being the Red matriarch, there wasn't much Mom and Dad could do about it.

A sound made me pause. I froze, gently easing a blade from my thigh. A rabbit scampered out, a horn on its head gleaming. A horned rabbit. It opened its mouth and hissed. I hissed back. It paused, cocking its head as if I were the creature with serrated teeth and a killer horn that only ate veggies. Yes. The rabbit with the teeth that can rip out a throat eats no meat. My world was weird.

It scampered into the underbrush as I sheathed the blade. The back of my neck itched. I refrained from scratching, instead thinking about what I would do when not on patrol. I should be home, gathering eggs for Mom and sparring with Jacob. And with Anna home, they would need me more than ever.

But since Grandma had punished me with the Mark of Dishonor, I was supposed to stay doing inane work around the tribe for at least a week. It was a way to show off my newest mark.

When in the tribe, I couldn't wear a bracer on that arm nor was I allowed to hide the bandage until the wound healed. Thankfully I could cover it when out on patrol. Only one mark was allowed per arm. A third mark meant death.

Grandma liked her Reds on point and well-disciplined, but if she knew what I had done... If she knew about me letting the horned rabbit and another werewolf go or about me bonding with a unicorn, I'd get a much harder rap than a mark of pain. I shook my head. It was good she didn't know. It would be terrible for her to kill the grandchild who was supposed to take over the tribe.

Today wasn't about killing magic. It was about discipline. Grandma's last words rang in my ears: "Bring me his pelt in one month." The *or else* was explicitly implied.

One month. And two weeks of that would be stuck meandering around the village on patrol. On the positive side, I'd be home for my family during this time. A slight smile crossed my face.

It fell when I remembered who I'd have to kill.

Shen's best friend.

I couldn't do it in front of Doc. It had to be while he was on a mission so I could pin it on his target.

Pain pierced my soul. I had to kill the werewolf. He'd killed my grandpa, but he was no longer an empty hood with killing intent. He was Shen's friend. Doc's adopted son. A *person.*

Something skittered across my mind, a *need* coming across my soul.

A form stepped out of the shadows of a tree. I blinked and blinked again, but he didn't disappear.

"Shen?" I asked.

"Alia," he said, his voice soft.

"What… what are you here for?"

"My Alpha has sent me for your matriarch. I have come to warn you. And bring you Fenbutt."

The little puppy scampered from the bushes. I caught him in my arms, a warm laugh escaping me as he licked my chin and face. I grunted, sitting down on a log. "You've gotten so big, wittle one. You'll outgrow me soon," I said. He woofed as if agreeing.

“Why?” I asked Shen.

"I brought him because he keeps escaping to look for you. He's stubborn." He tickled the pup under the chin and the puppy thumped his feet.

"And why the warning?"

He ran a hand through his hair. His eyes were creased with regret, and there was a pain in the jagged lines of his face I hadn’t seen before. “Because I am tired of killing.”

“You wish me to stop you?”

He shook his head, but then paused. “I do not know. I just do not—”

“You don’t wish to kill. I understand. You need to be free, Shen. Free of your Alpha. Free of her commands.”

Shen sat beside me, hanging his head. “I don’t know how,” he whispered. He turned and took a good look at me. “How do you know so much about people?”

I wanted to trust him. “It’s my Gift. And my Curse. I know other people’s *needs*.”

He nodded, looking off to the shrubbery when a twig snapped. A horned rabbit leapt from the brush a moment later and froze before scampering off. “That must be a hard burden. Do you know who I am?”

I nearly winced at the abrupt change, but went with it.“No.”

“I am darkness, Alia. And you are light, despite all you have been through.”

“Sometimes darkness is just how we look at things. Sometimes it’s the darkness which allows you to see the stars that can guide you home.” My voice was wistful, nearly longing. I snuggled Fenbutt closer, burying my nose in his fur.

“Do you need a hug?” he asked abruptly.

My chin jerked up and I stared at him.

He rubbed the back of his neck. “It might be an idiotic offer… yet you do much for others. I am here, and you do not seem to mind being around me?” His voice was so hesitant, unsure. So unlike him.

He raised his arm, and I slid beneath it.

“Werewolves gather in packs not only for safety but because we need others.”

I leaned my head against his chest and listened to his heart. There was a power in his body that I knew could be used to break me. However, it was the power of his words over me that terrified me.

“There is safety in numbers, yes. But more than this, there is connection. There is family. There is freedom.”

“What about when your pack is sick?” I whispered.

He sighed. “When a werewolf’s pack is sick, he cares for them but leans on another, stronger werewolf. We all need support, even the strongest of us all.”

My shoulders quaked. My soul quavered at the understanding in his voice. “Who is there for you?”

“Doc and his mate,” he said, and I heard the smile in his voice. He leaned closer to whisper, “Who is there for you?”

I couldn’t answer for the lump gathering in the back of my throat. Mom and Dad would’ve loved to be there for me, and in many ways, they were. But with Anna sick and them caring for two toddlers at their age when they should be out traveling or enjoying their retirement, they couldn’t bear my burdens and theirs.

“Me,” I said at last.

He breathed out, his heart slowing. “I understand.” He froze, his muscles going rigid. “I smell… blood.”

I didn’t want to move, but he leaned down and his nostrils flared. His eyes took a distinctly red hue. He moved Fenbutt so the puppy lay against my chest so he could get to my arm.

Shen grabbed my wrist, and at my sharp intake of breath, he released me as if I’d burned him. A low rumble spread through his chest, and his eyes swirled with flecks of red and gold glittering in the dark abyss like embers dancing in a night sky. He gently untied

my bracer. His pulse pounded in the veins at his neck. I remained still as he gently eased the bracer from my arm.

When he saw the bandage where blood had already shown through, he unleashed a growl that made me jump at the promise of death.

"Forgive me. It is just… May I?" he asked. I nodded, unsure what else to do. There was anguish on his face. He unwrapped the rolls and carefully peeled off the red-stained bandage.

When he saw the wound itself, he just… stopped. His breathing, his movement—I had never seen someone become a living statue. He closed his eyes, his breath returning in such a ragged gasp that I knew he was fighting against… *something*.

"Who… did this to you?" His whisper was a ragged sound torn from the depths of his chest. His eyes opened and again, he stared at the mark carved into my wrist.

The Mark of Dishonor. A shape carved into my skin and designed to resemble a spider lily, with six curling petals inside eight reaching legs. The cut encompassed my entire wrist and trailed halfway around my arm. It was red and raised and still wept blood and discharge. The blade used wasn't serrated, so it sliced but didn't tear the skin. A small mercy.

I numbly shook my head, reaching to hide it from him, but he gently moved my other hand away, his eyebrows furrowed. "It was just a punishment…"

His growl threaded through my bones and shook my soul. "Who? Why?"

"I–it was my fault. I–I failed." Did Shen know his best friend was Hood? I couldn't be sure, and I didn't want him to think Fen was to blame. I had let him go of my own will, and I would take whatever punishment came because of that decision.

Shen's eyes rose from my wrist to my face. He set a hand on my cheek, his eyes meeting mine. I sucked in a sharp breath at the death sworn by his eyes so red it seemed as if they were bleeding. "I will only ask once more, Little Red." His voice darkened with promise. "Who. Did. This?"

"Grandma," I said, my lips parting and mouthing her name even if it was a mere whisper.

"Tell me why I should not kill her."

A shiver ran through his body as his forehead grew a soft, downy fur that lay against my skin.

"She's my grandmother," I said.

"Give me something better or else I will complete my mother's order without issue or qualm. I will not feel bad about killing the one who hurt you."

That shook me out of the trance his words and the pain in his eyes had put me into. "Shen, if anyone is going to kill her, it's going to be me."

A low rumble spread through his chest and it took a moment for me to realize he was laughing. "Only you, Little Red, could snap my wolf from a murderous rage with a death threat."

"Murderous rage?" I squeaked.

He pulled back, and I wasn't sure if I was relieved or disappointed when I saw his eyes merely flecked with red rather than consumed by it. "You will never understand how close I came to ripping your grandmother and every adult in your village to shreds, Little Red," he said quietly.

I shivered in his arms, even as I buried my nose into his neck. Words wouldn't come. No one, not even my family, had become so angry at the punishments doled out by Grandma for the 'good of the tribe.' But Shen… he… he…

He kissed my hair and wrapped his arms around me and Fenbutt, who had sat so silently I'd nearly forgotten he was in my arms. We sat there for a good while, just being.

And it was nice.

Shen

A SIGH ESCAPED Alia as she burrowed into my chest. I tightened my hold on her, Lycus aware but nearly ice cold in his rage. Her own grandmother was responsible for the scars along her body. The pain ran deep in this one.

"Why?" I asked.

"For the mission I didn't complete."

Even werewolves do not mark their progeny because of failure. My own mother does not do such things. I had been captured and tortured a few times in my life, but that was mostly by my own volition to gain access to a leader. My tormenters had died the moment I had escaped. My own mother did not torture me. No, she let others do such things and took my will, but she did not torture me.

"What mission, Little Red?" I said, attempting to keep my voice even.

"It was why I kidnapped you. To draw him out. But he didn't come. And then I… I let him go."

"Who?"

"Sicario Hood."

My blood ran cold.

Alia

SOMETHING CAME OVER SHEN. A *need* broke through. And for once in my life, I could not read the *need.* It was all over the place, a seething, teeming mass that stabbed into the wall around my soul.

"Shen?" I whispered, moving back to peer at his face.

The person who peered back was the emotionless visage of the one I'd first kidnapped. A cold chill ran down my back and my heart sputtered in my chest as fear wrapped icy fingers around my heart.

"Shen?" I whispered again.

"Alia, I—" His claws gently poked into my back as he partially shifted. His shoulders slumped, and he leaned his forehead into mine. "I am so sorry," he said, his voice taut with anguish and loathing.

"For what? You didn't do anything, Shen," I said, trying to understand.

"I am the reason you were hurt."

"That's not for you to take. My grandma marked me because I failed. That's all there is to it."

"But why mark you? Why not do something different?"

A hollow feeling came to my chest. "In the Reds, we are bound by different rules. Grandma knows I have an aversion to killing, so she made the only pathway forward about killing. And when I went against my tribe, she made sure those above and beneath me in the Reds would know I'd failed. It isn't my first."

He lifted his head and stared at me with eerily dark eyes. "Show me."

I took off my other bracer to show a mark just like the one I'd recently received, though my older one had healed into a red scar instead of a white one because of the Ambrose ink which leaks from the blade used to make the mark. It seeps into the skin and causes an odd necrosis when it heals, leaving the scar a mottled black and red. "This was because I let my grandpa die."

"How old were you?"

"Eleven."

Shen stared at me with horror growing in his eyes. And there was something deeper, some hint of a revelation. His eyes broke contact and he glared down at the mark on my wrists.

His face appeared older and haggard, drawn with some burden I couldn't define. "Alia, there is something I must tell you—"

A low pop interrupted us and Shen gagged right before a wave of scent washed over me. I scowled down at the sleeping puppy at our feet, but a low laugh bubbled up from my chest when I saw Shen plugging his nose and breathing through his mouth.

"It's not *that* bad," I teased.

He raised that scarred brow. "For you with your useless little nose, perhaps it is not so bad," he said, tweaking said nose.

I grinned up at him, and he melted, pulling me back into his arms. "I am sorry, Little Red. None of that should have happened."

"Are you… ok?" I asked at last. His needs were buried, but it was odd. They nearly felt numb, as if he was resisting the significant pain he was suffering.

He let out a hollow chuckle. "Why do you ask?"

"You're not yourself."

"You know me that well?"

I pulled back to look at him. I saw dark circles beneath his eyes, and there was a spot on his chin that was missing hair. I reached up and touched it, feeling smooth skin, as if it were freshly grown. He closed his eyes and leaned into my touch, a soft grumble sounding from his chest and making me jump. He didn't seem to notice, and I realized it was almost a sound of contentment.

"I—" He stopped like he'd second guessed what he'd been about to say. "Someone who was under my protection is on Seventh this night."

My heart broke at the lack of emotion in his voice. He was trying so hard not to feel. "Shen." I tilted up his chin. "Look at me."

He opened his eyes. In that moment, his walls fell. The emotion poured from his heart. And he *felt* it. Oh, how he felt it. His eyes burned with a pain that eclipsed anything physical and tore apart the very soul.

I reached up and grabbed the back of his head and guided him to lay on my shoulder, trying to hold him together with pure, physical strength.

His shoulders shuddered. He lifted a hand to press into his eyes. "I should have saved her," his voice cracked. "I was *there* but could do nothing. I see it over and over again in my mind. The sword. The blood. The sigh as she crossed from this world to the next—" His shoulders shook, and I felt hot tears soak into my tunic.

My lips trembled and my heart ripped inside me. This sweet soul who had carried so much… Nothing I said could make this better. Freakin' nothing.

But I could be here. And I could feel with him and mourn a beautiful soul who was no longer with us.

THE SKY RUMBLED as I made my way back to the village. A rabbit hurried into its burrow and a ground wren huddled in a stand of tree roots that made a slight cavern.

"I saw you," a voice behind me whispered from the underbrush. I spun, blade outstretched. Graham's sad blue eyes peered at me from beneath his Red hood. "Why have you betrayed us?" His voice was lowered, pain coating it. "Betrayed me?"

I quickly shook my head. "They aren't like what you think. There are good shifters. Good mages. Good of every kind of being."

His face grew hard. "After all we have been taught, you really believe those lies?"

"What if what we were taught were the lies?" I stepped forward. "Graham, don't you see?"

"You speak nonsense, Alia. But for the sake of our friendship and the honor of your family, I give you this chance. Do not dally again, or I will report you."

My fists clenched into fists. "I'm not someone to be ordered about like a damsel. I'm a free being with sound reasoning. Look beyond your fear for a moment. Look beneath the cracks of what we were taught. Can't you see?"

His eyes softened for a moment. I thought… I thought he understood. But his next words shattered that. "I believe you think so, Alia. But you have been put under a thrall. It's the only explanation. Can't you see that? Do you really love a werewolf? They're monsters!"

"Not all of them, Graham." My voice came out pitiful as I watched him. It was odd, seeing him like this. And I saw myself in him. It was as if who I once was collided with the me I was becoming. He

was stuck in a mire of avoiding the truth. I just hoped his eyes opened before it was too late.

"Get help, Alia, before you kill us all." He spun, trudging through the underbrush with heavy steps.

My shoulders dropped as fear carved a chilling pathway down my spine, and I shivered.

CHAPTER 23

Sicario Hood

ALIA

Anna writhed in the bed. I dabbed her brow with a cool cloth. I'd already given her Ledum three times that day. It had helped tremendously those first few weeks, but today she'd only became worse. She was wheezing. Her lungs were shutting down.

My heart hollowed out in my chest when the first shiver wracked her. Her eyes were rolling in her head and her fingers began to shake. She moaned in pain. Everything was breaking to pieces.

An episode was coming.

And I didn't have a mage stone to stop it.

She *needed* to relax so her body could heal from being constantly on edge, so it could rebuild detoxification passageways. She *needed* to refuel her energy. I couldn't exactly explain that one besides it couldn't happen until she felt safe. And she *needed* to know her loved ones were safe and cared for. Wait.

Rey had visited and taken their kids to go play with his friend's children. Mom told me that's why they weren't here.

Anna hadn't been able to sleep or relax ever since. I'd sent Jacob to watch them. Maybe…

"Anna, I sent Jacob to watch over your kiddos. They're safe. Relax, sis, and remember the waterfall. Do you hear its gentle roar as it falls into the blue pond beneath? Do you see the dragon queen yet? I see her. She's splendid in all her beauty, white as a lily and shimmering with the mists alighting on her scales."

When I finished, I glanced down to find her still, her eyebrows remained furrowed but her mouth relaxed and her breathing evened. Relief sent a cool balm into my soul. She *needed* rest and peace, and her body was finally getting it.

My neck muscles spasmed from being wound so tight with worry.

The episode had passed.

But next time, if I didn't have a mage stone…

I couldn't afford one seeing as I hadn't been paid for the months I chased after Hood and had brought in no other pelts. Hood would bring everything I needed, but I only had a few weeks to accomplish that mission. I'd paid a few Reds to run some errands for me, and I knew where Hood would be.

Yet could I truly kill Fen? Someone Shen cared deeply for. Could I kill Shen's brother to save my sister and my place in this tribe?

I could change everything. As matriarch, I could save so many lives.

Maybe he would understand?

I shook my head.

No. He wouldn't. Shen would find another way instead of killing.

But as Anna shivered and whimpered in pain, I knew what I had to do.

THE ARENA WAS TEEMING with individuals who had come to cheer on their perspective teams. It was a monthly match between the best and the worst of the upcoming human mages.

Prince Gerald was a mighty big supporter of this so-called sport. He never missed a match, not even the one after his son died when most would stay home in mourning.

The matches begin with the least powerful and end with the most powerful. Which was why I was dressed in a freakin' dress and huddled around a bunch of people who could slit my throat at any

moment, watching both those around me and the people surrounding Gerald, who was already half-drunk on spirit rum.

He planted a sloppy kiss on a woman with long, black hair, wearing a short skirt. She giggled, but as soon as he turned away, she discretely wiped off the slobber. I gagged on her behalf.

Down beneath the screaming of the crowd was the sizzle of lightning as two wielders went at it in the center of the bowl-like sand arena. This was the last match. Thank Source. I was about to die if one more person touched me. Or I suppose it wouldn't be *me* who died if I accidentally stabbed someone. Would hate that for them.

When Gerald and his posse gathered their things to leave the arena, I was more than happy to be slinking around inside of shadows as the people thinned. Then I didn't have everyone touching me.

Gerald and his guards were taking their normal route to their typical ale house, the Ale's Maiden. Idiots. Didn't they know varied routes makes it harder for assassins to track you?

I followed Gerald down, watching above and around the idiots when a *need* slammed into me. Then it was gone. It was familiar. The person craved *freedom.* It couldn't be.

Fen was Hood. I'd once thought it could've been Shen, but I saw Fen. He was the black werewolf with the heart on his haunches.

I blew on my dart and Gerald jerked, causing an arrow sent from two stories above the alley to go wide and crash into a pile of crates. Gerald's hired mercenaries quickly picked him up and darted down the alleyway.

No more arrows were shot, which was confusing. Why would Hood not try to finish him even if he hit a mercenary? What's one more soul added to his tally?

A glint of light reflected off a golden eye before it looked away. He was right above me.

Ice flooded my veins as my heart tried to bruise my ribs.

I jumped, scrambling up a trellis which creaked and groaned to reach a window on the second story. Four feet from me was a balcony made of rusting iron. I gathered myself and leapt, barely

grabbing the bottom of the balcony. My body jolted as the rusted iron dug into my hands. I pulled myself up and used a rotting wooden ladder to make my way to the roof.

Just in time to see a black-cloaked individual pause on the far side of the roof. Goats were lounging in the corner, chewing their cud as if they saw cloaked assassins on the daily.

The dry grass crunched beneath my feet. The person turned, their cloak snapping in the wind. There was a hint of a golden eye before he jumped. "Stop!" I yelled, racing forward.

I didn't have time to think about it. I was two stories up and Hood had just jumped across to another roof. He wasn't getting away this time. I needed another mage stone. I needed to be heir. I needed to avenge my grandpa. I needed to restore my family's honor.

I had to bring back his pelt.

There was no other choice.

I pushed myself as I ran, my legs burning on the last step. I used the ledge to push myself off and then I was airborne. Weightlessness made it feel like I was flying for a split second, then the ground tugged at me. I flailed my arms and legs, but I knew I wouldn't make it.

I stretched as far as I could, but my fingers missed the edge by mere inches. I saw my death. Felt my own prickling *need* for someone to be with me, to help me—the first *need* of my own I had ever felt.

No one would come.

Mom and Dad wouldn't know what happened to me for a very long time. They may never know, as bodies that turned up in the streets were put in a massive, unmarked graveyard.

Fingers wrapped around my wrist with a bruising grip. I slammed against the wall even as I met glowing golden eyes above me within a face wreathed in shadow.

He pulled me up as if I weighed nothing and deposited me on the roof in a tangle of arms and legs. His movements were jerky and abrupt. He turned to go, making it five steps before I pulled out my blowgun and aimed it.

"Stop!"

He paused.

I slowly stood, my body aching and battered, but nothing broken. I walked around him to stare at the man of my nightmares. He seemed smaller. In my dreams, he was a giant, snarling, untamable beast with red-flecked teeth and glistening red eyes.

But before me now? He was just a man. Not a nightmare. I could beat a man.

"Tonight, you die," I said.

Was it my imagination, or did his shoulders dip at my words?

I blew on my dart, and he didn't move. It struck his arm, just above his bracer, and he stumbled. Then he straightened. That dart had enough wolfsbane to kill a smaller werewolf. He should've been out.

A yell pulled from my aching chest as I attacked. I punched him in the stomach, and he grunted, exhaling as if pained. Something about that made me pause for a split second—a second he could've taken advantage of. I knew better than to give such a killer an opening, but he didn't grab my throat as I thought he would. No, he stood there, watching me, even as I recovered enough to land a strike against his kidney and then his solar plexus. On those, he didn't move.

It was as if he were frozen in time, even as I kicked his jaw with enough force to bring him to his knees.

I slapped him. "Fight back!" I screamed into his face. The rage was wearing off. The adrenaline was fading. And behind it was a question.

Why didn't he fight? Even Fen would fight me.

And why didn't I attack with my daggers?

The answer to that question was one I didn't want to know. I didn't want to admit to myself that I already knew the answer.

He pulled his cowl down and spat blood from his mouth. I put a blade to his throat. "Fight me," I yelled as he slowly turned, meeting my eyes with his golden gaze.

"Never," he whispered.

I stumbled back as if struck, tripping over my own feet and landing on my butt.

"*Shen?"* I gasped. No. He was not Hood. I saw *Fen*. I knew Fen was—

His face fell, pain in every ridge and divot. He pulled his hood further back, exposing the dark hair I had longed to run my fingers through to see if it was as silky as it looked. He glanced up at me with eyes vulnerable but unyielding, lips pursed, and crooked nose highlighted by the silvery moonlight. His eyes turned from gold to the darkness swirled with gold as if they were stars in an abyss.

He rose cautiously as if I were a spooked filly. He kneeled before me and grabbed the blade I'd dropped in my shock, putting it in my palm. Without breaking my gaze, he drew my hand and the blade to his neck, tilting his head in submission and baring his artery for the kill. When the icy blade touched his neck, he closed his eyes.

I dropped the blade as if it'd burned me.

His eyes snapped open, a question in them. Why didn't I kill him? I didn't know. But I just knew that I couldn't.

We stared at each other for many long moments as my brain went back through our time together. From our first meeting, where he nearly killed me and I stabbed him to our last, where he held me and showed such pain over the mark on my wrist and let me hold him while he mourned the one he'd lost.

Tears wouldn't come. Shock was settling too deeply.

He bared his neck in submission once more before he rose and walked away. I sat there with numbness coating my frozen heart.

Shen was Sicario Hood.

Shen had killed my grandpa right in front of me.

Shen was the one I would have to kill in order to save my sister and become Matriarch of the Reds.

CHAPTER 24

First Blade

ALIA

"What am I supposed to do, beaut?" I whispered against Ran's mane.

She leaned into me, offering what support she could. But how do you kill the person who took care of you when you were sick, who helped feed a wolf pup despite his aversion and continuously showed a gentleness of spirit despite his horrendous situation? Shen was dangerous, but not bad.

Yet he was the one thing standing between me and the heirship.

I couldn't do it. I just… couldn't. I thought I could. Even if it were Fen, I wasn't sure I had the strength to go that far against my conscience. It would kill what was left in my soul.

I couldn't do it.

I clenched Ran's mane in my fists.

We were close to the tribe, but not close enough to be in view of the spotters in the trees. Even if we were seen, I just couldn't bring myself to care. I was done.

Done trying to be everything everyone thought I should be. Done trying to fill everyone while I was empty. Done trying to meet everyone where they were when my life was falling through my hands like sand. I couldn't catch it. Couldn't stop it. Could only watch as everything I worked for disintegrated before me.

I'd stopped by the house to see my family sleeping peacefully. Rey must've brought back the kids, as Fina and Jess were sleeping

in bed with Anna. Anna looked peaceful. She was ok.

For now, though I didn't know how long that would last.

It would be another few hours before sunrise, but I decided to visit Grandma. See if I could beg of her another mission. Any mission. Anything that could pay enough for a single mage stone so I could save my sister's life. I knew what her answer would be. But I had to try.

I left Ran on the edge of the woods. She gave one last, low nicker to let me know she was there. But nothing she said or did could help me. Not anymore.

Soon as I stepped inside the tribe's borders, a Red enforcer came to meet me. My blood ran cold. Was I caught? His smile seemed to say otherwise.

"Welcome, First Blade Alia," Markus, Head of the Enforcers, said. Enforcers were a special branch of Reds who served as the hands of the elders and protectors of the matriarch.

It took a moment for his words to penetrate. "*What?"*

His grin broadened. "Former First Blade Hilda has retired to care for her child, who was born premature but lively. You are now First Blade of the Reds."

More Reds stepped out behind him, all of them grinning as I stared with an open mouth and a brain that couldn't quite comprehend what was happening.

"You did it, Curo!" Brandt shouted, slapping me on the back hard enough to bruise and shocking me from my stupor.

Twenty Reds spread out before me. They struck their fists against their chests and saluted me as First Blade.

The streets were nearly deserted at this time of night, with cicadas screaming in the distance and cats yowling from under porches and shop fronts and side alleys. I had an honor guard as we passed from the outskirts of the city to the more posh interiors where the more affluent individuals lived above their shops and homes. Further in, the highest-ranking Reds, enforcers, and elders had homes about half the size of Grandma's palace.

We stopped beside a home with a guard stationed atop a ten-foot-high gate.

As First, Hilda was highly regarded for her skills and sacrifices made for the tribe, but most Reds didn't live in large houses such as this. Hilda was the daughter of Elder Pulma, and he ensured she was well protected when home.

Grandma wasn't of the sort to protect her progeny in such a way. She let life's lessons flow and didn't offer help, even when I begged her to find a way to help Anna. She said the weak would die and the strong would take their place. It was the 'way of the world' according to her.

I no longer agreed with her twisted ways of thinking.

Grandma spoke of strength as a mere physical aspect, yet I knew Anna was the strongest of us all even if I could beat her in combat. Strength of the soul was more powerful than any physical prowess.

Hilda stepped from the gate with a tiny babe swaddled in her arms. Hilda was missing a few fingers from a werewolf bite that nearly took her hand. She had the pelt hanging on one of her walls.

Now, as she looked down at her babe with a softness in her eyes I had never seen from the hardened First, I realized perhaps killing wasn't everything and that truly living was much more worthy than surviving. If Hilda could find freedom from killing, could I?

"I, Hilda of lineage Illuminatio from father Pulma and mother Estra, succeed to you, Alia of lineage Conscientia from father Liam and mother Annikia. You shall henceforth be known as First Blade of the Reds."

Hilda stepped forward, and I offered her my hand. She sliced my finger and used the blood to mark my forehead.

She was about to get on her knees, but the way her eyes pinched gave me a hint of empathy. She *needed* rest so soon after having her babe.

I caught her arm. "Don't," I whispered for her alone to hear. I raised my voice at those going down on a knee behind me. "Don't bow to me, you lot of heathens. It's time to celebrate, isn't it? I've waited too long for a lot of freakin' old tradition to take this time. I need an ale."

A spattering of laughter went up after my words and a few of the more ale-inclined who would be scotch drunk later cheered.

Hilda gave me an appraising glance of her dark eyes. There were bags beneath them, and she was near ready to drop from exhaustion. She bowed her head, more regal and more respectful than any bow I'd ever seen. "Thank you," she said.

She turned and entered the household, and I watched with a tiny smile as her husband welcomed her back and gently put his arm around her waist to support her.

There were good people out there. Even in a tribe of killers.

The Reds lifted me on their shoulders and toted me to the Fox and the Werewolf, a little alehouse with wolf, deer, and cat heads on the walls. A massive fireplace roared in the wall across from the doorway. We Reds took up a massive table near it. A round of ale was spread around as tales spread of my first kill of a rogue werewolf when I was still a trainee all the way to how I'd defeated a lightning mage with a rod of silver in the ground.

A slow smile spread across my face as I watched those I'd fought and bled beside toast my new position.

Maybe everything would be ok.

But then a frown crossed my face.

"Where's Graham?" I asked Brandt.

He glanced around. "Dunno. Haven't seen 'em since he let us know you were back."

A cold pit settled in my gut. "He let you know I was back?"

Brandt squinted at me. "Yeah? That a problem?"

I smiled. "Nope. Not at all."

He was still watching me with a weird glint in his eye, but he finally shrugged. He set his tankard down and yelled, "Another round!"

I shook my head at him.

Ran? I sent across the bond. There was no response. I had only the slightest connection that expressed she was still alive.

As the Reds celebrated, I tried to convince myself she was sleeping. It had happened before when she was far into a dream or purposefully blocking me.

I tried to enjoy the night, but worry tinged my thoughts.

CHAPTER 25

The Betrayal

ALIA & SHEN

Alia

A scream tore me from the nightmares of my tortured sleep. My hand closed around the blades under my pillow and I rose in a crouch. This would be a good distraction from my worry and fears about Shen and Ran. Whatever or whoever dared to attack my family would feel my wrath.

I leapt from the loft, only to see it was *enforcers*.

"Stand down by order of the matriarch of the Reds and come peaceably," Head Enforcer Markus said.

Jess was screaming, holding tight to her mother's leg. Fina was crying with big tears racing down her little chubby face as Anna cradled her in shaking, shivering arms. Jacob was staring in open-mouthed horror, his hair going every which way from sleep. Dad was holding a sword before him, and Mom had an arrow trained on the enforcers.

"What's goin' on?" Dad asked.

"You're called before a tribunal. We've known each other a very long time, Liam. Please don't make this harder than it already is."

Dad nodded. He put down his sword.

They tied our hands.

When they got to Anna and the kids, a noise escaped me. "Please, don't hurt them," I said.

They didn’t listen and tried to pry Fina from Anna’s arms. Fina screamed, her shrill voice on the edge of hysteria as Anna had tears racing down her face. She also had a look of determination in her eyes as she fought for her daughter.

The enforcer went down with a high-pitched squeal when Anna kicked the man right between the legs. He fell to his knees with a keening moan.

Another enforcer drew her sword.

“Leave them,” Enforcer Markus said.

The other enforcer immediately sheathed her sword and left Anna and the kids cowering in the corner.

But when Anna met my eyes, they churned with determination. “We’ll be ok,” she mouthed.

I blinked a burn from behind my eyes as another enforcer grabbed my arm and shoved me out the door.

We followed Markus down the same street I had travelled mere hours before. The glances thrown at me couldn’t be different. Last night, these same enforcers and Reds had cheered as I became First Blade. But now? Most wouldn’t even look at me, and those that did spat with disgust. We were trussed like cattle and dragged to the largest center hut where we typically had community meals and celebrations. It had been a long time since we held a trial here.

When we dove into the crowds, the people were not gentle with me. It was as if everyone knew what was going on except for me. One fist caught my lip, splitting it on impact. I hit the ground, rolling with the momentum. I made it to my knees even with my arms tied behind my back. A boot caught me in the chest, sending me back to the ground. I tried to get back upright but another boot clipped my head. I lay, stunned, staring up at the clouds dotting the early morning sky. They looked so peaceful. For a moment, it took me from the pain in my body and the betrayal pounding in my heart.

“That’s enough now,” Enforcer Markus said, helping me up and glaring at anyone else who attempted to attack me.

A haze settled over my thoughts as shock tried to dampen my emotions.

I came back around as the enforcers shoved me to my knees before the tribunal and our leader, my grandma, Matriarch of the Reds.

I struggled against the bite of rough, spelled rope.

Bitterness replaced all the joy I'd found in completing my tasks as a Red. As Shen had walked away from me last night, I knew. Even as I was toasted as First Blade, I knew. I didn't belong here. They couldn't accept me as I was.

And everything I'd believed was a lie.

Humans were no better than any other being out there. Humans were both good and bad, just like everything and everyone else. Our choices lead us to our habits, which lead us to our character, which was who we became.

I'd become the very monster I'd once fought. Ran and Shen forced me to see beyond the black and white of my raising and realize all I'd seen were hints of darker and lighter gray.

Reds liked to think of themselves as pure, but they were hypocrites of the worst order. They used magic against magic users—all to kill said magic.

It was sickening. And I'd never seen it so fully as when I was bound by magic before the tribunal. All senses of *needs* were cut off.

A white form was trussed to the center of the tent, iron shackles binding her legs. "Don't hurt her!" I pleaded.

Grandma stood from her chair in the center of the Matriarch's Tent which was large enough to hold three regular huts. Three elders stood on either side of her with one behind her. The judges who governed the day to day of the people were to the right of them.

Behind the judges were my family, and behind them? So many of my tribe flooded the room they were packed tighter than sardines. The door was left propped open—despite the cold of an early winter blasting through and landing on my sweaty neck—so those outside could hear the trial.

And in the middle of it all, with a snarl on her lips showing her sharp teeth and eyes rolling in her head while she lay bound, was my precious Bond. My best friend. My sister.

Her mane was stuck to her neck with blood and sweat. Her hooves were immobile, tight chains biting into the thin skin around her cannon bones. Her eyes met mine with a finality I found terrifying.

My blood ran cold. I still couldn't contact her over the bond, and that was when I noticed the rope around her neck. A wolfsbane rope. It must be dampening the bond.

"Not only have you been consorting with a magical animal, going so far as to *bond* with it and break sacred laws, but you have brought dishonor to your family, to your tribe, and to the Reds. You have betrayed us all." Grandma's face held nothing but contempt. Her eyes were cold as ice and sliced through me worse than my favorite black stiletto.

The crowd roared. I chanced a glance over to see only hatred. A few had confusion pinching their brows, such as Brandt and a few other Reds who knew me and fought with me. But the rest? They were calling for my head. For the unicorn's head.

I deflated in surrender. I'd tried.

It wasn't like I didn't know this would happen eventually. But I'd always wondered *what if*. *What if* I did everything so well and followed the laws to the letter, then wouldn't they *see* I wasn't the enemy? That I wasn't a betrayer just because I was born with magic?

I should have known the truth. If they admitted I wasn't a betrayer and that I wasn't evil, it would ruin the entire law. Everything they stood for and had killed for would be meaningless, and they would realize many innocent beings had been killed merely because they were born different.

The guilt would be too great. Even I found the guilt heavy with what I'd done. And some of these Reds had been killing for twice as long as I'd been alive. How much blood of innocent beings was on their hands?

"It must stop," I whispered. The killing of so many, just because of an outdated belief—it wasn't right.

Until that point, I'd hoped the Reds could be saved. Redeemed.

What I hadn't realized in doing what was right was that I'd become the enemy of my people. The respect I'd strove so hard to achieve. The pride I'd broken myself to hope for. The honor I'd worked so hard to rekindle. All dashed away in a single day.

Grandma wrenched my face up, her eyes now blazing with fury. "You not only condemned yourself, Aurelia, you condemned your entire family," she hissed. And for the first time, I saw something in her eyes. Something buried beneath rage and disappointment.

Fear.

The night I'd watched a wolf tear apart Grandpa, I didn't see this fear in Grandma's eyes.

Graham came to the front, hands behind his back at attention. He wouldn't look at me. Wouldn't even move his eyes for a simple glimpse, even as I implored him to look. He said we were friends. Couldn't he spare me a simple glance? Heck, I'd be fine with a blink of those eyes.

"Report," Grandma said.

"Red Alia was in the forest with a man who was clearly a werewolf. He did not kill her. She spoke with him. She admitted she has magic."

A gasp rose from the crowd. Everything was so silent I heard a mouse skitter up the walls.

Then the yells began.

"Outrageous!"

"Black-mouthed jis!"

"Whip and hang the family!"

The last one caught on until nearly everyone in that room, people I'd known my entire life, chanted for my death and the death of my family. I squeezed my eyes shut, preparing for the verdict.

"She has betrayed us," Grandma said, her voice soft but unyielding. "But I am nothing if not fair. She will have a trial, and then her and her family will be hanged should they be found guilty."

A ripping came from behind me. I turned to find my Red hood being passed from hand to hand, each ripping the hood straight down the center one inch at a time. Bile rose in my throat.

When it got to Grandma, she took it and with one last glance at the people, tore it in two and let the tatters fall to the ground.

I stared at the limp red fabric laying discarded like refuse on the ground. It felt as if my life had ripped down the center with that hood.

As Grandma opened her mouth to say more, a shadow detached from the ceiling. The shadow pooled at the ground right behind Grandma, then rose as a man. My heart caught in my throat when those burning eyes met mine.

Shen

Trussed like cattle to slaughter.

Snapping down the emotions rolling in my chest was harder than ever. Her eyes were glimmering with tears. A single starlit orb fell from the corner of her eye, tracing the gentle curve of her cheek and dropping from her clenched jaw. Part of her face was discolored, and red dripped a scarlet path from a split in her lip as her very people spat on her.

Lycus howled with displeasure. *Kill. Kill* ***all,*** he demanded.

I swallowed back the urge to shift and rend them limb from limb. Tingles erupted on my arms, the precursor to fur. I managed to keep Lycus in line. Barely.

I let my cold dagger rest at the corner of the matriarch's neck. She did not flinch.

"You're dead," she said, her voice soft.

I shook my head. So this was where Little Red got her strength. "If I am dead, then why do I draw breath?"

Alia's eyes were about to fall from their sockets. They pleaded with me, but I ignored the silent communication. "I propose a trade," I said, just loud enough for the people ringing Alia and her bond,

watching her humiliation even though she had always been one of them. But this… this had gone too far.

The matriarch cocked her head at that. I wondered if she had studied how to kill werewolves so long she now subconsciously mimicked them. "I am listening," the matriarch said.

"The girl, her bond, and her family—let them go. No one to follow. No one to know. As if they were dead, yet they live. Just far from here."

"And what should we expect in return?" the matriarch asked. "It must be something worthy, for while you are a snit with many talents, these have betrayed their own."

Alia flinched, as if those words struck her. I closed my eyes for a scant second, pushing Lycus back. But his teeth became my teeth and erupted out from between my lips. "My life for theirs," I said, my voice a low growl since my vocal chords were partially changed to wolf.

I watched Alia carefully. She always gave her feelings away by minute reactions. A twitch of her thumb, a crinkle of her nose, a cock of her brow, a smirk on her lips. But even I was not prepared for the loud gasp that broke through her parted lips. "No!" she hissed, struggling against the ropes.

The matriarch tsked. "Young, foolish love. I shall enjoy taking the burning of my lifelong achievements out on your hide, Wolf."

My shoulders hunched just a hair. She would take the exchange.

"No. No, you can't. This is all so wrong," Alia said, her voice cracking. A tear trailed her cheek. She took a deep breath. With her eyes closed, she rose from where she was half-huddled on the ground.

"No more, Grandma," she said, her eyes now flashing with the determination of a she-wolf.

My wolf howled with pride, watching her rise from the ashes of the humiliation and rejection of the very people she loved and had bled for.

"I challenge you for rite," she said, her spine ramrod straight, her voice hard as cold granite, and her eyes twin stars shining in a midnight sky.

My aedus star. My pathway home. My carissimus.

I knew it then. I understood. The bond was why I was drawn to her, but she was the reason I had grown to love her. Her spirit and her grit. Her kindness and her gentleness. She had fought so hard, came so far.

"No, Red. This is a battle you will not win," I said, hoping against hope she would listen to reason.

But her eyes flashed and her lips pursed in a thin line. She reminded me of a kitten hissing. Cute, but with sharp claws.

"No, you listen, Wolfie. This is my tribe, my people. And I will end this," she whispered, her voice so low I was the only one in the tent who heard it. My smirk should never have come. I knew it would only encourage her madness.

But I also knew *her*.

Regardless of what I said, she was more stubborn than any werewolf.

CHAPTER 26

The Rite

ALIA & SHEN

Alia

It was him all along. And looking into his eyes, I knew he knew that I now knew.

I wouldn't lose him. I couldn't, regardless of what he was. He had freedom to fight for and too much to live for.

A surge of anger coursed through me. The thought of him even contemplating trading his life for mine… I wouldn't allow him to commit such a sacrificial act so *cheaply.* No. He'd better freakin' *live* to explain everything.

For the first time, I planned to use my Gift as a weapon. Let's see the Reds face the monster they've created.

THE RITE WAS NEVER MADE to be invoked. It was a form of war, an outright battle cry to harm the few for the good of the many. It was only in place for a fully-fledged and honored Red hunter who had been stripped of their title. A very specific set of circumstance had to be met, and it had only been invoked once in the five hundred years

since Reds had gone to war with magic. The invoker died by his father's hands.

I wouldn't follow in my ancestor's footsteps. Yes, the man who died was my great-great-great-great-grandpa, who'd invoked the Rite when his father proved himself to be unstable after a werewolf killed his wife. But the Rite favors the bold, and insanity is nothing if not bold.

There was a terrifying light in my grandma's eye. The blue of her gaze was fading with age, but her gaze was still sharp. And just as angry.

Ever since Grandpa died, she'd never been the same. I hadn't seen the change until recently. The way she pitted the Reds against me, all to make certain I never received the sword of rule. It was clear now that she never meant me to be the one to succeed her. All the blood I'd spilt and all the lives I'd taken at her bidding were all a farce to keep me compliant.

I was never meant to kill Hood. I was meant to fail so that the way would be paved for her chosen: Graham. Or some other. Who knows what was in her mind.

The Rite was simple. It was a test of courage. Of wisdom. Of wit. And it was set in place in a way none could be disadvantaged. For it was not a fight. It was a war. A war of the mind.

The loser was at the mercy of the winner. And Grandma had no mercy.

We were set at each end of the Red's training grounds, just on the edge of the woods. This place was a massive sand pit with plenty of weapons and seating along the perimeter. Ran and Shen were bound at my back. My family was behind Grandma—except for Jacob, who was given leave to fetch Anna with enforcers as guards.

Rey had the kids, and he was watching with a disapproving scowl marring his face.

The three elders were between Grandma and me. Elders Pulma, Timone, and Vera.

"You will each be given a full turn to find the hidden meaning with a simple riddle. You may not harm each other. You may not harm the other's hostages. You may slow the other down. Your

riddle is thus." Elder Pulma opened the scroll sealed since the time of my great-great-grandpa. "Light by night, dark by day. One hand to hold, one to release. I come for everyone, but not everyone accepts me as the boon I may be. What am I?"

The scroll comes up with its own riddle when it's opened. I've always wondered how it worked, but now I wondered if a mage had spelled it. And if so, what did that say of our ancestors?

Did it mean we were actually… A few things connected in my mind. The way our training taught us of the mages and the unicorns and the dragons and what good each creature brings. There are books with pages ripped from them from the olden days, but I found one in the far back corner of the Red library that was unscathed. It spoke of Source and how she gives Gifts to all her people, some more noticeable, some less so.

Did that mean we were going about this all wrong? Did our ancestors truly try to kill magic, or did they work with it?

Jacob returned with Anna, whose head rolled as she was carried between two enforcers. Her *need* to rest struck me, though it wasn't as sharp as before. She was better. This stress could undo everything we'd worked so hard to accomplish.

"We will get Doc out for your sister," Shen whispered from behind me. "Or we will get her to him."

I turned to stare at him. He was bound with magic I couldn't undo and had a silver collar around his neck, but he was thinking about helping my sister?

"We need to survive first," I whispered.

His crooked grin popped up. "We will, Little Red. You have the heart of a wolf and the spirit of a dragon. You will lead us to victory."

I stared at him for another moment. This was the werewolf who killed my grandpa. He was also the werewolf who'd stuck by my side and believed in me and cared with his entire being. He had been under Alpha Command when he killed Grandpa, right? If so, then that absolved him of the crime. His Alpha was the true one at fault.

I turned back around.

Jacob was blinking his eyes mighty fast at me. When he was certain I was looking, he stumbled over his own feet and went

down. The enforcer rolled her eyes and helped him up.

I walked over to them, hugging Anna. "Please, be kind to her. Can you take her inside and give her a place to rest?" I asked.

"For dragon scum like yourself?" the female enforcer said, scoffing.

"Enough," Enforcer Markus said. "Brandt, take the sister into the house. Make sure no harm befalls her."

Brandt gave a salute to the heart and gently supported Anna, taking her inside.

Oddly enough, there was no one here I'd rather have by her side if none of my family could do so.

Markus gave me a slight nod. I returned it with a salute and a bow of gratitude. While my head was close to the ground, I uncovered what Jacob had left for me. It was a tiny book. And on the face, it read: *Of Wars and Peace, Life and Death, Within these Pages lie the Red Code of Honour.*

It was old. Were it not of sheet metal, it likely wouldn't still be legible. I tucked it close to my heart and walked away. When I was around a corner, I opened the pages. My eyes grew wide as I learned the origin of my people from within.

Everything I thought I knew was a lie.

Shen

THE BONDS WERE DIGGING into my skin. I had endured much worse. This was merely a pesky annoyance.

Alia's unicorn, Ran, was silent as a grave beside me, her eyes trained on where her bond last went.

I scooted over to her in marginal increments. She did not move, which was good, but I was unsure if she was aware of my plans.

Then her eyes darted to me. She knew.

I hid a grin. She was just as devious as her master.
The first thing I cut away was the rope about her neck.

CHAPTER 27

Revelation

ALIA

You have a nice male, Ran said in my mind.

I sagged against the side of the building, trying not to cry.

Hey, beaut. Are you ok?

I'm fine, sister. They didn't harm me beyond the catching.

My knees weakened, even as I stared down at the book in my hand. This changed everything. Not only were we working off a false set of code, we were doing a disservice to all who had come before. To the sacrifices made of the Reds in the past generations.

We had lost all honor.

I needed to protect this book with my life. It was the only thing tying us to the old ways. The people needed to know.

A cheer rose from behind me.

I spun around the corner to find Grandma had returned. And she bore a leaf. It was gold-hued and striking. It changed, turning a bright red before browning. Then it greened up, unfurling. I had only seen such a thing from one place: the Isle of Galah, an island no one returned from. It was an isle where the seasons changed without warning and even the terrain could become desert one moment and mountainous the next. How did she get that? The Isle was too far to travel. She must have had it on hand to grab at a moment's notice.

My shoulders dropped.

So that was what the change meant.

I took a deep, cleansing breath and emerged from the shadows of my hidden corner. If I had lost, then I had lost. I would face it with dignity.

"I return!" Grandma said.

The people stomped their feet and chanted, "*Magnum Reginea Victoria!"*

I stopped beside my grandmother, holding my head high.

"You had no chance, child. But you will be commended for your bravery to face me, even unto death," Grandma said.

The scroll zipped from Elder Pulma's fingers. He stared at it with wide eyes, trying to grab it from the air. The scroll easily evaded him, flapping its paper wings like some abstract bird to come sniff the leaf in Grandma's hand. It sneezed—not joking, the force threw it back about three feet—and then it came to me. It alighted on my tunic, its wings moving gently like a butterfly on a flower. I watched it as if it were a roach near my bed, tempted to shoo it off but unsure what that would make the thing do.

"What do you have there?" Elder Pulma asked.

"Nothing," I said, leaning away from the scroll's wings. No way was I handing over this book. I'd protect it with my life.

The flying scroll thingy detached some letters from the inside of its pages and used them to latch onto the book in my pocket. How something so light and tiny could hold something so weighty with mere ink was beyond me. I suppose it wasn't mere ink. Based on what I'd found in the pages of the book, it was likely a magic scroll spelled by mages, just as I'd suspected.

How did Jacob find this? Why did he find it? And *how* did he know I'd need it?

It almost… could the book be the answer to the riddle and not the changing of seasons of the Isle of Galah?

The butterfly scroll slowly flapped its way to Pulma and the other elders, putting the book in Elder Pulma's hands before alighting on a pedestal. Like a bird tucking its wings back in after flight, it slowly folded back into a regular scroll and went still.

Elder Pulma opened the book. His eyes grew wide. "W-Where did you find this?" he asked, his voice breaking like a boy going through

puberty.

“Does it matter?” I asked.

Elder Pulma slowly shook his head. “No. No, it does not. The scroll has spoken. You—you are the winner of the first trial."

Everything stopped. My people, my grandma. Heck, it even felt like the woods themselves ceased rustling.

Grandma slowly turned. Her face was so expressionless it was a bit terrifying.

A bit? Ran said.

She was right. It was a *lot* terrifying.

"The second trial will be told by the sword. The life of the matriarch is rife with terrible decisions. Bring them forth."

Two enforcers brought out two beings. They sagged in the grip of their captors, their skin red and peeling. I sucked in a breath. Nymphs. The one on the right raised his eyes. A part of me sagged. They were not the nymphs I had met, but it was terrible to see the two, who looked like nothing more than children, brought before us, shackled and tortured. My heart ached at their *need* for water, for freedom, and for family.

Elder Pulma's eyebrows creased. “At times, there will be moments for mercy. Other times, one must be willing to sacrifice what one wants most for the good of the tribe. Before you is a choice. The nymph is the only magical creature who is not our enemy. They are conduits of Source. But in order for the Rite to conclude, a life must be given. Something must die. Either that which you cherish most, or this innocent creature. One will go free, and one will die."

A blade tore through the chest of the second nymph. My cry caught in my throat as she gurgled a gasp of pain. She toppled forward. I caught her.

Her gasping breaths tore through me. She looked up, her eyes rimmed with moisture and her cries of pain resonating with something deep within me. In her, I saw myself. Fighting, ever fighting. Ever breaking. Ever failing.

I pushed her thick, ropy strands of hair away from her forehead.

Her *need* eased to the gentle want to not be alone as she crossed. I gave her a gentle smile. "You will be safe, little one. Go ahead, Source is waiting," I whispered.

A keening cry tore from the male nymph, who fruitlessly fought his bonds, the chains clacking as he struggled. His pain-filled cry filled the air, a raw, aching sound that tore between the bonds of soul and heart and left one broken within.

Her gasps lessened, and with a final sigh, the life left her eyes.

"Grandchild, are you certain you have the strength to be matriarch? These hard decisions must be made for the good of the tribe. I will not sacrifice one of my own, even for the life of an innocent creature. I can endure the hard decisions. I fear you cannot," Grandmother said, her voice musing.

Grumbles followed. I glanced around, seeing many nod at her words. They agreed. With death. No matter what the elder had said about the nymph's innocence... This was a magical creature, so in their eyes, she deserved death.

"Hard decisions must be made as a leader, but innocent lives are never to be chosen in cold blood," I said.

I glanced over at Ran. Shen was beside her, both of them watching me with a knowing gaze. To move forward, I had to choose. I had to kill that which I loved most or this innocent nymph before me.

And I knew what I loved most.

I bowed my head. I stood and walked to the nymph. He had fallen to his knees, and his eyes were devoid of emotion when he stared up at me.

"Make... quick," came his raspy voice.

My soul trembled. I brought up my blade. His eyes closed and his head bowed. But I stepped behind him, breaking the chains binding him.

"I will not kill an innocent," I hissed at Elder Pulma, my eyes narrowed into slits.

"Something must die," he whispered, his eyes sad but knowing.

"Kill me, Alia," said a voice behind me. I turned to find Shen staring at me, his dark eyes rimmed with gold. His lips twitched in a

sad smile. "It would be a fitting end."

I shook my head, denial setting in. I couldn't kill an innocent. Neither could I kill those I love.

What I love most.

Wait. The wording was off. I glanced over at Elder Pulma. His words originally said were what one *wants* most and then it was what one *cherished* most.

The words spiraled in my head. I glanced over at my family. Something had to die.

"I give up," I said. I fell to my knees, the sand crunching beneath me. This was right. It burned as if I were stripping my heart from my bones, but it felt right. Now to see if I could leave my tribe better even if I could not lead. "I surrender my right to lead. I choose First Brandt to lead in my stead." He would do well. And he could defeat my grandma.

In those words, my dreams shriveled and died. What I had sacrificed, bled, and nearly died for over and over was gone. Dead. My hopes for the future, my love for my people. In those words, I had killed it.

What I wanted most was dead.

A tear tickled its way down my nose to fall to the sand beneath my knees to create a tiny gray bead in the otherwise white sand.

Slow clapping made my head jerk up. Elder Pulma looked at me with something of a mixture of respect and a bit of sorrow in his eyes.

"Well done, Alia. You have passed the second and final trial. A true leader will sacrifice what they love most for the good of their people, and you have shown not only quick thinking in the face of danger, but wisdom in laying down what you desire for the betterment of those around you."

Silence descended on the people.

Until Grandma stepped forward, her face an icy sheet of calm.

Please don't…

"I challenge the Rite," she said, her voice clear and ringing with authority.

I nodded, even though I wanted to wince.

It’s frowned upon to not receive the Rite’s diction with humble gratitude, whether in loss or in victory. But it’s not out of turn to question the Rite—it favors the bold, after all. Which is where my great-great-great-great-grandpa had lost his life to his father.

History would not repeat itself. Not this time.

"Please take him to the closest body of water and let him go," I told Enforcer Markus. He nodded his head in a near bow, assisting the dumbfounded nymph to his feet and escorting him to the woods. The nymph gathered the body of his companion and followed Markus from the field of death.

I turned back to my grandma while wiping the sand from my trousers and watching her with narrowed eyes. The nymph's blood stained my hands and my soul.

No one else would die this day.

Grandma drew her dagger. I drew my twin blades.

We circled. The sand crunched beneath my feet, rain having not come for a time making it less malleable. The air was a cool breeze freezing the sweat beading at my brow. My heartbeat eased as I focused on the many sensations around me and relaxed my grip on my blades.

She feigned left, coming in with a back sweep of her blade from the right. I caught her blade in a V made of my blades and shoved her back.

She favored her left side. It was an old hunting accident, or so we were told.

I feigned left, right, then kicked her chest, making her stumble.

She glanced up. “My turn,” she said.

Her blades were fast. I had never seen her move with this kind of speed. It was bordering on supernatural. I blocked a feint, got hit in the shin with a low kick, and barely knocked her blade aside to miss her taking my arm. Instead, she put a deep gash into my bicep. My hand still clutched my blade, but it was weak.

Grandma didn’t let up. I backpedaled as she drove forward, her blade seeking blood. I leaned back, her blade inches from my neck. Sharp pain rose from my chin as her blade clipped it.

She kicked out, catching me in the ribs. She elbowed me in the back of the neck, sending me to the ground.

She paused. There was always a moment where Grandma enjoyed letting her prey know they were about to die. It was no different for the granddaughter who betrayed her.

Shen growled. I barely saw him from the corner of my eye, his eyes completely red as he bared his slightly longer fangs.

"Trust me," I whispered, even as I stared up at my grandma.

I hoped that kept him from dealing his own death by shifting.

I rolled into Grandma's legs to send her off balance, blocking her blade as it came for my head. The blade stopped inches from my nose with the sharp zing of metal on metal. I could count the individual divots where a practiced hand had sharpened the blade until it could slice bone.

My other hand came up and grabbed her sword arm, trapping it. With a scissor kick, I knocked her in the temple hard enough for her to see stars and then placed my blade against her neck. Grandma froze at the feel of cold metal on her skin.

She glared down at me, her chest barely moving even though I was heaving, my lungs feeling as if there were bricks sitting on them.

"Aurelia of the lineage Conscientia from father Liam and mother Annikia has won," Elder Pulma said, his voice hesitant and nearly disappointed.

Grandma stepped back. I stood, watching her carefully even as I followed her with the blade. A hint of blood dribbled from around the blade as I had leaned too far into it. Her face was blank, but it was also pale. And there was something in her eyes, hinting that this was not over.

"Are you really going to kill your grandmother, Aurelia?" she asked, disappointment making her frown lines stand out. "You have done enough by taking my heirship by force. Are you really going to kill me now after all I have done for you?"

I pulled back my blade. "No. You're going to watch change unfold. And then you'll either live in freedom or die a prisoner. It'll be your choice."

She stared at me, her lips pursed in displeasure.

The zing of an arrow met my ear.

Something large and white shoved me aside.

"So help me, Shen, if you have another arrow in your back—" I rolled and came to my feet, but it wasn't Shen who stood there.

Ran's beautiful eyes stared at me as she nuzzled my face. I froze. "Ran?" I exclaimed.

Her legs trembled.

I caught her head as she fell, barely avoiding being stabbed by her pearlescent horn. I laid her head on my lap, stroking her cheek. "Hey. Hey now," I whispered.

I looked over her body and saw the fletching sticking from her side.

"No. *No*." My breath came in short gasps as hers slowed. Her eyes never left mine until they closed from pain.

Shen fell to his knees beside her. He touched the arrow, causing her to shiver as pain wracked her body. I implored him with my eyes to not say what I suspected.

"Silver and iron," Shen said, his voice soft and face twisted with helplessness.

We both knew what iron does to fae creatures.

"*No*. It can't—I won't lose you, sis," I whimpered.

She blinked open eyes so filled with love it was hard to see the pain in their depths.

Sister, it was always you who was meant to find me. Don't worry now, we'll meet again, either in this life or the next. It is of no consequence. We're bonded, heart and soul, and nothing can render us apart—not even… death.

"No, you can't. You hear me? I need you. Now more than ever." I gently stroked her cheek even as my chest felt as if it would implode. I clung to her head as if I could hold her here by the force of my will.

She nickered slightly, the sound hoarse. *You never needed me, Alia. It was I… who always needed… you. My name, sister of my heart and wind in my wings, is Elysia.*

"I don't want your name, idiot. I want you," I whispered, hugging her close. Her *need* was not sharp against me. If anything, it was *relieved*. And I didn’t know why. Was her life here more painful than I’d been aware of?

Her eyes, so full of love, lost their life. No longer was there a soul within her. No longer was there love, pain, or joy or sass. My bond, my sister, my best friend was no more.

CHAPTER 28

Hope is Never Dead

ALIA

I bowed my head over Ran's mane and breathed her in. I ran my fingers along her horn, felt her soft whiskers, and basked in her scent of freedom and oakwood and lemon one last time.

I gently lifted her head from my lap and slid out from under her. I placed a final kiss against her soft muzzle. I ignored the rending of my soul as the bond I loved passed from this body.

"*In saecula saeculorum, amare,"* I whispered, closing her glassy eyes.

My shoulders shook. My body ached. My fists clenched. Someone had killed my bond. And they would pay.

My shoulders bowed, but they were as taut as the strings of a fully drawn bow. "Who?" I said almost under my breath. Then I shouted, "*WHO?"*

There was a commotion behind me. Shouting, a grunt, then a body hitting the ground. I turned to see a man on his side, sneering.

"It was just a unicorn," he said, hacking up phlegm as he rose to his knees.

I smiled, a parting of the lips that was both a snarl of pure loathing and the amusement of a master predator. Within four strides, I was before him. I felt his *need* to prove himself as the younger sibling of the youngest sibling.

"You"—I looked him up and down—"are nothing. You're a lost cause, broken by the very system you strove so hard to impress. But

you always lacked a little something, didn't you? First, it was in childhood. Your brother was always better, getting the attention and the praise. You just wanted it. Just a bit, and you would've been happy. But then your brother stole your dream to become a Red, didn't he? And he was so much better than you. You had to cheat on your last test merely to pass while he was first in the ranks and became the Head Enforcer within five years. What did you hope to prove by killing me? That you could?" My laugh was low and humorless as I watched his face become increasingly pale. "Anyone can kill. It takes a man to rebuild what was broken. And I'm more of a man than you'll ever be."

He trembled in his shackled bonds, but that didn't stop him from trying to get at me. He leapt upright and charged. I stepped aside and kicked him in the butt.

He face-planted, eating dirt. I shoved his head into a pile of manure, leaning down to whisper, "That unicorn was my best friend and a creature with feelings, emotions, hopes, and dreams just like the rest of us. She knew sacrifice. She knew love. What do you know of these?"

I rose, spitting on the ground beside him.

I reached for my blade.

A hand touched my arm. I whirled around, my dagger at the throat of the person before they blinked. I met eyes of pure red.

"If you need to kill, I am your dagger," he said, those blood-red eyes searching my face. "But do not bloody your pure soul with an execution. Do not become the monster you defeated."

I slowly lowered my blade. "I already am," I said.

I turned to face my Reds. "This ends today. The killing, the murders, the pain. We are no longer assassins of magic, but protectors of life itself."

Elder Timone was the first to step up to me. He took a knee before me. "*May matriarch vivunt longum et bene,"* he said, striking his hand against his chest.

Mom and Dad were next, along with the other elders. Head Enforcer Markus made my grandma get down on her knees before

me. "*May matriarch vivunt longum et bene,"* they said, excluding my grandma, of course, who said nothing.

Then the fully-fledged Reds in their hoods bent a knee in four rows of ten with the trainees behind them. "*May matriarch vivunt longum et bene."*

At last the people themselves, those of the entire village, bowed before me.

"*May matriarch vivunt longum et bene."*

"May the matriarch live long and prosper," Shen said, getting down on a knee beside me.

"Rise," I said. "We were lied to by our leaders. By those we trusted." I waved Elder Pulma up. He still held the book in his hands, clutching it to his chest. "Elder Pulma, would you please?"

He nodded, slowly opening the page.

It was in the language of old, but for the sake of the children, he translated it.

"Thus is the honor and the living might of the force known as the Red Knights of the order of Spero, spurned to form by the death of the great Nymph Queen Eledira, who gave her life so we humans could escape the Dark Mage Jilhishad. In and by her honor, we are to defend the weak, mend the broken, mourn with the mourning, and uphold the defenseless. We are an order deigned by Source and honored by the One True King to stand against the evils of this world in all its forms, from the darkest mage to the vilest human. For the Gift does not define good nor evil. It is what one chooses to become that defines the soul. Thus we choose our banner:

"Power ab intus, tutela omnium.

Choices sunt potentiae quaeramus.

Damnum potestate sui exitium honoris.

Honor sui, honor arbitrium, honor Vita Fons, honor Auctorem, honor Vita.

Tutela omnium, fides tribui, vita magicis."

Elder Pulma cleared his throat, then spoke the Banner of the Reds in common.

"Power from within, protection for all.

Choices are the power we seek.

The loss of this power is the destruction of honor.

Honor self, honor choice, honor Source, honor Creator, honor life.

Protection over all, loyalty to tribe, life to magic."

How far we have fallen from what we were supposed to be. I hung my head, wondering what we could ever do to make up for the evil we had wrought upon the face of this earth.

"You will condemn us all," Grandma said, her voice trembling, her eyes pale with rage and fear. Never had I seen my grandma so small. She was still kneeling, watching with horror as the scene unfolded before her.

I crouched before her, my heart aching in my chest. All I ever wanted was her love. For her to be proud of me. But I realized then that she could never provide what I needed. She was a broken creature filled with malice and heartbreak. And a broken chalice can never fill another until it is mended.

Grandma did not wish to be mended. Not now. Perhaps not ever. And I couldn't force a mend upon her. She had to choose it.

A hole grew in my soul… one that had been there all along, though I'd never realized it. It was like an old friend, always there, always hungry. It was fed with scraps of her attention and grew with the bereavement of her absent love.

It was about time I let myself grieve the grandma I needed, as that was a grandma I never had.

It was time that I love myself as I had loved her: with grace, compassion, and gentleness, forgiving of mistakes and allowing others to bear the consequences of their own actions.

My rage dwindled as I looked down at her and felt only sorrow. Sorrow for what she could've been. Sorrow for what we could've had. And sorrow for what would never be.

"Better to die knowing you did what was right than to live with the guilt of innocent blood," I said.

Dad grabbed Grandma's arms and took her to her home, where she would live out her days in whatever peace she allowed. I couldn't kill her, but I wouldn't allow her manipulative lies to deceive my people any longer.

I was Matriarch of the Reds, and it was time to find peace.

SOMETHING NUDGED MY SOUL. A gentle *need*.

I smiled, thinking it was Ran's last parting gift to me. For a moment, I could *feel* her. My bond, as she was the very first time I met her. Whipped and alone and near death, and all she had needed was a hug. This time, though, she needed a hug I couldn't give her.

My knees gave out. I stared at the blood-drenched sand, unseeing, my mind somewhere far away where no pain could touch me. I knew I would have to get up, get back to work, lead my people. But it felt so bleak without my best friend here to keep me straight, to tell me when I was being an idiot, or to watch the birds fly as we cuddled in our favorite clearing.

“Alia—look!" Jacob said, his voice rising at the end with a hint of fear. I glanced up, my eyes hazy from a sheen of tears.

I turned just in time to see that Ran was *glowing,* pulsing with a soft, warm light. Her body lifted from the ground, her horn glowing like a tiny sun.

My Reds yelled and gathered weapons as unicorns stepped from between the trees, their white, brown, and golden bodies glowing with an ethereal light.

Shen held up a hand to stay their blades. My Reds glanced from him to me. I nodded, telling them to listen, but I held up two fingers, saying to use caution as I stood, prepared to kill those Ran loved in order to protect my people.

Shock ran like cold lightning through my veins as the unicorns gathered before Ran and bowed a knee, their chins resting on the sand that had swallowed my bond’s lifeblood. I had never seen crazed unicorns so... tame.

Maybe because you've never looked, said a sweet, sweet voice in my mind.

"Ran?" I whispered, my lips numb and my knees weak. I took a step forward, but my legs almost didn’t hold me. Shen was there, holding me upright, but I didn’t—I couldn’t acknowledge him.

I glanced up at the white light, and I had to shield myself from it as it grew to rival the sun. Then it was gone.

I blinked away the lingering black spots and—and—Had I passed out? Was this all a broken dream my subconscious provided to prevent me from losing it? Was it all—

Stop talking yourself into insanity, she said with an imperial snort.

I ran.

The unicorns who could disembowel me with their horns didn't even cross my mind as I darted between them to the being in the center. My heart leapt up to my throat as I slowed, staring at the beauty and majesty of the creature before me.

She slowly rose, getting her feet beneath her and stretching her wings out to the sides. She shook them a few times, then folded them down so they wouldn't hit the surrounding creatures.

Hello, Two-Legs, she said, her voice knowing and sassy, yet a sweet melody to my mind. Her voice became wry and mischievous as she dipped her head toward me, her warm brown eyes nearly glowing with happiness. *Did I surprise you?*

My laugh was broken by a whimper, and I face-planted into her scales. Her wings came forward and her trail wrapped around me as she cocooned me in a warm embrace. My body shook as sobs rose from deep in my chest to wash the plains of her scales.

My bond. My friend. My sister.

Alive? And a blasted *dragon*?

I will tell all later, Two-Legs. For now, know I was cursed into that form and the Sacrifice of True Love set me free. I had to die before I could live again in this body, Alia. I'm so sorry I couldn't tell you sooner, but I did try to warn you. You were just too much of an idiot to realize it.

I choked on a laugh and hugged her tighter before I pulled back with a smile, my eyes still watering. I cradled her huge cheek in my hand, kissing her nose that twitched between velveteen whiskers.

My heart was overwhelmingly happy. My soul felt like everything would be ok. My bondmate of a sister was here. My werewolf was here. My family was here.

The Black Mages would quake with fear.

The Matriarch of the Reds was coming for them.

And now she had a dragon.

PART TWO

Growth Requires Dedication to Truth... and to Yourself

BREAKING FREE IS PAINFUL, YET IT IS THERE THAT YOU FIND YOUR WINGS.

CHAPTER 29

From the Ashes

ALIA

Ran flew. She soared through the skies, doing twirls and loops as if her very being was a child just introduced to flight.

I watched her—all my people watched her. They were a bit more concerned than I about her, though.

"Is that... a dragon?" Brandt said, coming out of the house, supporting a very determined-looking Anna.

Anna glanced up to find us all free and joyful, and her face transformed from grim and determined to shimmering with happiness.

"Boy, did you miss a lot," Jacob said in a deep, grown-up voice. When everyone turned to look at him, he shrugged. "What?" he asked. His voice broke that time, reverting to his usual tone. He was growing up.

Brandt sat with Anna on a bench in front of the Red's Palace—it was more of a small castle housing all the Reds on missions at the edge of the sand arena—and they both watched the dragon play in the sky.

My eyes tried to water as I watched Ran, so gloriously *free*. All these years, I hadn't realized she had missed something so vital to her being.

I turned to my people. It was time to get them into shape.

"What's we gon' do 'bout them unicorns, miss?" a shopkeeper asked, strangling his hat while staring at the unicorns who were

milling around, eating—I did a double take. They were eating *grass* from along the edges of the sandpit?

"Leave them, unless they attack," I said at last. I nearly jumped when one walked five feet from me, swishing her tail and eyeing me, but otherwise passing by without altercation. She grabbed a bite of a flowering bush along a water fountain beside the palace. Everyone scurried about like scared ants until there was a large swathe of open ground between them and the unicorn.

I watched the white creature and my eye twitched. Why were these unicorns not murderous beasts?

They helped me wage a war. The war was not right nor just, and I killed many, Two-Legs. Her voice was broken, tinged with deep sadness. *They were cursed with me.*

That... is a tale in a half. I would need to get with her soon so we could go through it all. Right after I had a *talk* with Shen about him killing my grandpa and why he was still hanging around. Didn't he have other things to do?

But for now. "The murderer is in the dungeon along with Graham, correct? Are there any other dissenters or problems I should be aware of?" I asked Elder Timone.

He rang his robe. "Matriarch Aurelia—"

"Alia, Elder. Just Alia."

"Very well. Matriarch Alia, you have been through a terrible ordeal and lost a close friend and got her back. Are you not going to take this time—"

"To what, Elder? Let my people burn in their guilt or make poor decisions? They need a strong yet fair leader. That is what I will be. Do not make me repeat myself."

"Yes, madame. There is a faction of the Reds who have become disgruntled about no longer hunting for pelts to rise in ranks. Perhaps you could send them out for some other creature or another way to rise in rank?"

"Gather the Reds in the courtyard of the school, from the youngest trainee to the oldest who is not on bedrest."

"Yes, madame." Elder Timone bowed before scurrying away—regally, of course—to do my bidding.

"Honey, don't push yourself—"

"I'm not, Mom. I just have a job," I snapped.

She looked at me, not with anger, but with sadness. I exhaled to calm myself.

"I'm sorry. I'm coiled tighter than a strained tendon," I said with a wry smile. "Can you both make sure Anna is safe and get the kids from Rey? Source only knows he doesn't need those kids longer than a second."

Mom and Dad nodded. "We will, hon. But we're here when you need us, alright?"

Tears pricked at my eyes at the gentle understanding in her voice. I loved my parents. They were the best. I gave her a quick hug.

"Oh," she said, quickly wrapping me in her arms. It'd been a long time since I had initiated a hug. I squeezed her one last time and then grabbed Dad's hand with one arm and Jacob in with the other for a group hug. I met Anna's eyes. She gave me a smile, her eyes bright but sad.

"We're gonna be alright," I whispered, sensing their *need*.

I walked over to my sister, embracing her. She clung to me with a strength she hadn't had in some time.

We split off soon after that, all to do differing tasks. It only took me four blocks to realize I had a shadow. I whirled on Shen who kept pace about three steps behind me. "Shoo! Begone!"

Despite the seriousness of his face, he cracked a crooked grin. "Did you just try to shoo me away like a stray animal?"

"Isn't that what you are?" I said.

His eyes darkened and shuttered. Poppycock. I just keep messing things up.

"Shen, listen, you're a capable and strong individual, ok? And so am I. I've got this, so you can go home now."

He took a step closer, but when my body closed in on itself, he took two steps back. "Alia, are you pushing everyone away who you may lose?"

I didn't need his knowing gaze or the reminder of what we had. I didn't need to remember how much I loved him.

I knew he didn’t kill Grandpa on purpose. I knew it was likely forced on him. But having just lost Ran, I knew the pain of losing another. I got her back, yes, but I couldn’t risk my heart.

Everything that happened ran through my mind. Taken prisoner, betrayed, then matriarch of the very people who tried to kill me. Ran murdered, Ran alive. What was I doing?

Was there even a chance my people could change just like that? Sure, in the heat of the moment, they'd given their vow, but I'd known these people my entire life. They were poised for blood, ready for battle, and they were attuned to killing all magical beings.

How could they go from murdering such a thing to protecting it? *Could* they?

I saw the many things I'd have to do in the coming days. Many would be looking for the chance to betray me. To stay alive, my mind needed to be sharper than ever.

We could do this. We had to. And this time, I had people to back me. My family. Shen. Even a dragon, for goodness’ sake.

"Shen, I don't know how to... deal with all this. Everything has happened so fast. First you, then being arrested, now matriarch?"

Shen came closer, his intense eyes studying me.

"Do you want me to leave?" he asked.

I shook my head *no*. "Yes," I said quickly, trying to stop my body from betraying me.

He pursed his lips as if hiding a smile. “Can I be your guard dog?"

My lips quirked despite myself. His eyes held a hint of satisfaction, as if that were his goal. "What?"

"Your guard dog. Your bodyguard."

"I believe you are overqualified."

He leaned in, his eyes searching my face with a hint of mischief. "Oh? The mighty Hood cannot be a mere guard dog for the one he loves?"

I sucked in a breath.

He backed off, running a hand through his hair. "Forgive me, you do not know all. Once you have the entire tale, you may decide if

you wish me in your life. Until then, I would merely like to be a person to ensure your safety. Nothing more."

I nodded, considering. "Friends?" I said at last with a tiny, vulnerable smile.

He grinned back as he shook my hand. "Friends."

A DEEP SILENCE settled over my Reds. They were gathered before me, from the oldest to the youngest sprites.

All hoods were down, as was custom when addressing their matriarch. It wasn't a silence of respect, but one of foreboding. When I had beaten my grandma, it changed everything. What we'd believed, what we'd known… it was all a lie.

And some wished to cling to the lie more than the truth.

Nerves sent my heart pounding against my ribs. I didn't want to do this. But they *needed* a good leader.

It was odd, to feel a *need* from a mass of folks. My Gift had slowly been growing to encompass more and more people. It was as if it was sentient and realized I was now responsible for more than my family and friends and the few people I passed in the streets. It was broadening, increasing… and burdening. But it was mine. And I realized it was exactly what I needed for such a time as this.

Once, I had thought this Gift useless. If I were to have a Gift of magic that I had to hide, couldn't it have been something like healing or the ability to grow food, ya know? But this… *this* was what I needed to lead a people to change.

Source knew that.

So when I stood before them, my heart went out to them, which soothed my nerves. I knew this. I knew how to help people through terrible things. Heck, I'd been doing it with my family for years.

"Family of my blood and friends of my soul, I'm sorry." I stood before them and bowed my head. "I, too, was a Red embroiled in my mire of problems. I was taught so many lies I didn't know what

to believe. I never spoke up about my questions because of fear of retaliation. Perhaps there was no other way, but I would've preferred any other way. I would've preferred a choice. A way forward where everyone was involved and everyone knew. For the greatest power we hold is choice, and I took that from you. For generations, my family has taken that from you. And for that, I am deeply sorry."

I clasped my hands behind my back and paused. Then I raised my head, speaking up and out, infusing my voice with truth. "I may be unable to give you a choice of leader, but I can give you a choice now. You are no longer required to serve as Reds if you do not wish it. I ask you to stay until the end of this month—nay, I beg it of you—for I feel our battle has only just begun and I *need* your help. After, you will be free to choose. I will not take that from you."

The Reds' cloaks rustled as they shifted. Their eyes remained straight ahead.

"At ease," I called out.

They relaxed, their eyes moving from straight ahead to rest on me. Even though that was worse to my poor frazzled nerves, I needed them to see my sincerity.

"So long as you hold to our code, you will be free to live your lives as you see fit. There will be no more hunts of pelts nor killing of innocents, but fear not, we will hunt. It will just be a different kind of hunt." A slow grin spread across my face. One of the Reds straight before me paled and stepped back. "We will hunt those who harm innocents, and we will protect those who are weak. You are the soldiers of the night, the assassins of the murderers, and you will make a difference in this world. What you did of ignorance will not be tallied against you; what you do with full cognizance will be. For now, know that you are not to be peacemakers, but warriors of a different master. We served darkness before. Now we will serve Source and all her light. Dismissed!"

My Reds came as one and saluted with their hands to their chests. "*Tutela omnium, fides tribui, vita magicis."*

That was their way of letting me know that I wasn't in this alone. My Reds were there for me. Even if they didn't entirely agree with me, they would follow me to the end.

My heart swelled. We may not be where I'd like us to be, but they used the new code, not the old. Eventually, my people would be a force to be reckoned with. A beautiful force of justice tempered by wisdom and love tempered by boundaries. We could do this.

Shen came to stand at my back. "Well done," he said, his voice filled with pride.

My heart smiled at those simple words.

CHAPTER 30

The Weight of a Crown

ALIA

Draped from my shoulders was a pure red dress with Ambrose flowers embroidered on the sheer sleeves. It fell down in tiered waves, ending in a bell shape before falling to the ground. It took Mom and three maids to stuff me into this thing. The corset alone was enough of a torture device to make a rock sing.

Shen stared. His eyes trailed from my hair falling in easy waves—completely unbound and driving me nearly as insane as the dress I couldn't even kick a bear in—down to my slippered feet and back up.

His lips quirked in a tiny grin. "You look… like a woman," he said.

My nose scrunched. "Just what every girl wants to hear."

He tapped my nose. I straightened it. "Do you wish to hear you are beautiful?"

I stared at him, opening and closing my mouth. Doesn't every girl wish to be told they're beautiful?

He smiled. It was gentle and completely at odds with his sharp cheekbones, scars, and crooked nose. "Alia, you do not need another to speak to your beauty. You are beautiful from here"—he pointed to my heart—"to here"—he tapped my head. "And here."

"You just gestured to all of me," I said.

His eyes gleamed with a hint of mischief. "I know."

I huffed out a breath, but a smile crossed my lips.

"The most important opinion is not my own, but yours, Alia. So what do you think of what you see?" He turned me to a mirror.

I stared at my reflection. In it, I saw a girl who had gone through Sixth to be here today. I saw someone who had fought through her own fears, worries, doubts, and pains to confront her past and try to change instead of letting the past define her or remaining in a mire of what she knew to be untrue. She was someone who wasn't perfect, but was doing her best with what she had.

"I see someone I'm beginning to like," I whispered at long last.

He squeezed my shoulder. "Would you like a hug?"

I nodded, turning and plunking my face into his chest. He wrapped his arms around me.

"I haven't forgotten, ya know. We still have to speak about what happened with my grandpa," I said.

He stiffened just a hair before he sighed, squeezing me harder. "I know, Carissimus. I know."

But for right then, all I wanted was to feel safe.

And in his arms… I felt safe.

THE THREE ELDERS waited on the far end of the sandy pit. Elder Timone, Elder Pulma, and Elder Vera. They wore their ceremonial red robes trimmed in gold. The two male elders, Timone and Pulma, were respectively tall and stocky. Elder Timone had a wiry build with a long beard, while Pulma was short and stocky with a head of gray hair. Elder Vera had long blonde hair and was the youngest of the elders. She had smile lines and dark eyes that could pierce metal.

My dress tried to trip me every other step as I walked through the sand to the other end. I think my grandma paid it to misbehave and make my crowning a disastrous failure. I refused to let something so small as a dress make this day any worse than it needed to be.

On the benches ringing the edges of the pit—more arena-style seating were brought in for this occasion—were my people. From

Lead Enforcer Markus to the youngest orphans, they had gathered to see this. I just hoped I didn't make a fool of myself.

If you do, I'll flame anyone who laughs, Ran said, flying overhead and making a few people duck or scream in fear.

A grin teased at my lips. She'd be the first to laugh. *Will you flame yourself, then?*

Ha-ha. Very funny, she retorted, though I felt her humor over the bond.

I stopped before the elders. There was no fanfare this day. No massive bonfires, no stomping feet. It was as silent as death itself.

"Today, we see a new matriarch crowned," Elder Pulma said. I always wondered if he spoke at public events because he had such a loud voice or liked to hear himself talk. Most times, I supposed the latter. "Today, we see a new matriarch to power."

Elder Timone stepped forward. "Do you, Aurelia of the lineage Conscientia from father Liam and mother Annikia, accept to keep to the Red Code of Honour as labeled within these pages and lead your people to follow in the Source's Light?"

"I do," I said, placing my hand on the Book of Codes—the original one, not the one we had faux plead on in previous generations.

"*Power ab intus, tutela omnium,"* he said. He bowed and gave me the book to hold in my left hand.

Elder Vera stepped forward. "Do you, Aurelia of the lineage Conscientia from father Liam and mother Annikia, swear to do good by your people and to lead them in the ways of honor and virtue and courage?"

"I do," I said, ensuring my voice was loud and clear.

"*Choices sunt potentiae quaeramus. Damnum potestate sui exitium honoris. Honor sui, honor arbitrium, honor Vita Fons, honor Auctorem, honor vita,"* she whispered.

She took a crown and placed it about my forehead, tying it in the back. It was not a traditional crown as seen on the mighty kings and queens of the kingdoms. It was a crown made for a monarch who couldn't afford to have something on her head that could easily be

dislodged. It went around the forehead a bit like a diadem, under the hair, then tied in the back to keep it in place.

Last, Elder Pulma stepped forward. "Do you, Aurelia of the lineage Conscientia from father Liam and mother Annikia, vow to protect your people as yourself and love those who would not love you? To be leader is to be servant of all and to make peace with those who would try to make war. But for those who are without honor, there is no law to protect them. In fact, our vow is to protect the innocent. Do you vow to punish the guilty?"

"I do," I said.

Elder Pulma nodded. "*Tutela omnium, fides tribui, vita magicis.*"

Elder Pulma kneeled, holding up the Sword of the Reds in his hands. I gently grasped the handle, watching as the golden light of the sun reflected off the surface as if flames moved along the edges. It was an ornate sword, not made for use but as a weight to enforce the burden of rule. This sword was too large to use as a weapon and much too heavy for a normal human to swing. Much like leadership, it was a heavy burden.

I held it and turned, driving it into the ground. I bowed my head and kneeled before my people.

"I, Aurelia of the lineage Conscientia from father Liam and mother Annikia, vow to keep the Code of the Reds and honor it by my actions as best I know how. I swear to do good by my people, to listen to them and give them the power of choice to live their lives as best they know how. I vow to love others as myself. I vow to be a servant to all and to become a leader who leads with justice, mercy, and strength to usher in a new period of peace where we honor what was, let go of the evils we have done, and bring forth a new era to protect those we have failed."

As soon as the last word passed my lips, a surge of power erupted from the book and the sword. It zapped through me and to the crown on my forehead, which then drove down into where my soul met my heart.

Needs washed over me. I gasped as they drove into my chest like a thousand tiny needles, some just tickling my soul and others diving into the walls I'd placed around it, trying to penetrate and

skewer me. Sweat beaded on my brow as I clenched my teeth and my hands shook on the sword and book.

Elder Pulma *needed* to know this time the pathway forward was correct or else his guilt might just kill him.

A few siblings in the crowd *needed* a kind, loving family. Another who had just lost her daughter *needed* to mother something. I stuck that away in the back of my mind for later.

Others were dealing with liver flukes and needed support for their detoxification systems. Others had blockages in their intestines and *needed* to flush those out. Others still *needed* love, acceptance, and healing—mostly of internal wounds no one could see.

I wanted to curl into a fetal position and die. So many *needs.* How could I even begin to meet them?

Easy, Two-Legs. I'm here. Let me bear this with you, Ran whispered into my mind.

I recoiled. I couldn't ask that of her.

You stubborn, little idiot. You aren't asking. I'm demanding. Give it. NOW!

I winced at the scream and realized what Ran meant about screaming giving headaches. No wonder she didn't like it. I would make an effort not to scream in her mind from here on out.

My reply stuck in my mind, but I knew there was no way I'd survive this without her.

I reached for the bond. It was a gentle band of light coiled around my soul's walls like a protective force, taking some of the needles without me even realizing it.

I invited her in.

Ran sunk into my soul. Immediately, she took half the load of the *needs.* My chest relaxed with relief and breath came into my lungs in desperate gasps as if they had been starving for air itself.

I realized then that I was feeling the overall *needs* of the Reds. If I didn't focus on the individuals, I found an overarching *need* for stability and purpose.

The overwhelming *need* felt like a black beast much larger than little me. But as I stood before it in my soul, I realized it wasn't too large for a team of people. Ran was at my back, and I somehow *felt*

the connections to my family and even every single person in my tribe to varying degrees. I was not alone.

The crowd was silent as I stood.

No one knew yet what to think of my reign. I was not yet trusted. Not who they wanted. I had changed everything they thought they knew. I was the threat that made them the evil of the world when they thought they were good.

When someone brings unwanted but *needed* truth, most people blame the messenger.

As I walked out of the arena with my head high, there was no stomping of feet nor cries for a long, healthy reign.

Everything was silent.

And I was ok with that.

Because I would change it.

Knowledge is the first form of change.

CHAPTER 31

Reign

ALIA & SHEN

Alia

The first thing I did as Matriarch was to become a trusted source. I had the Book of Honour transcribed by the best and allowed anyone to come in and see the process. The tribe would know it was duplicated word for word, just as it should've been long ago.

Then I had the book copied and made available for any who wanted one. They *needed* to read it for themselves, to know what was happening wasn't of the underhanded, false truths of before. This was an open sharing of knowledge so my people could trust me as a source of stability. To trust that I was for them and not against them.

Next, I set up three days per week where my people could come and express themselves. If they disagreed with the book or my rule, they would not be punished. It would be an open discussion. And that terrified me.

The first day was a week after my crowning. It was the first day the common people would speak with me directly.

"Please welcome Matriarch Aurelia of the Reds, first of her name, Harbinger of Peace, Warrior of Source, Curo of the people."

I blinked. I didn't think I'd earned any monikers yet. Most took years to earn their first monikers as Matriarch. And *Curo?* I had a feeling I knew where that one came from.

I had no time to ask, as the people were before me. From shopkeepers to Reds, they were here. This was the Matriarch's Tent; it wasn't a tent, exactly, but more of a large tepee with enough room to fit fifty Ran. It was designed for public speeches and announcements. Grandma held public disputes and trials here.

I wanted this place to be different, to be a place of communication.

The people were silent. "Please, relax. Source only knows we've attended enough silent disputes."

A tiny wave of laughter spread through the crowd.

"We're here today because everything is changing so very fast, it's hard to keep up. One day we're killing magic, the next we're supposed to protect it?" I shook my head. "Today, you can say anything you wish and ask any questions so long as they are kind and considerate of your fellow people. That's all I ask."

"What if we don't have kind and considerate questions?" a buxom shopkeeper said, her arms crossed.

I nearly snorted a laugh. "Are you gonna tell me your mother didn't teach you manners?"

A few people coughed into their hands.

She sputtered, but went silent.

I smiled at the rest of them. "No questions will be turned away today. I may not have all the answers, but I can let you ask. And maybe we can find the answers together."

"Are ya old enough to lead us?"

"Why'd you change everything?"

"Things were going well for us. We were stronger than any magic! Why must that change just because we found an old book? It doesn't change how magic is the bane of human existence!"

I nodded and held up a hand, but the crowd surged. The questions were a tidal wave of boiling anger and resentment, trying to crash over and smother me.

Shen stepped from the shadows behind me to set a comforting hand on my back as my heartbeat began to quicken. "They do not need mere kindness. They need to see you as a capable and strong leader who will stand up for them by first standing up for herself," he

said above the rising tide of people clamoring for attention and answers.

I nodded.

I put my dart gun to my lips and blew above the crowd. A loud bang flashed above them. The people dove to the ground, covering their ears. It was a simple stun explosion I used to blind animals with night vision. It wasn't super loud, nor was it blindingly bright.

"Now that you all can hear me, we can have a conversation," I said with a wry smile as my people slowly rose to their feet. "When you walked in, there was a sheet with a number on it for you to pick up; you'll be called upon in numeric order. If you can't write, we have scribes to help. As you can tell, asking all your questions at once is just a way to make sure no questions are answered."

A few of the people got up, dusted themselves off, and left without a word. Others scowled and scurried off to find the table I mentioned.

My scribe called out the first number, and the questions began in earnest.

A man stepped forward, wringing his hat in his hands. "Matriarch, I thank ye for seeing us. My family 'as long since been part of selling and trading with the big city folk the many pelts and items we receive from the hunts. Mistress, I just… I fear I won't be able to provide for me family no more." He hung his head.

My heart went out to him. I understood exactly where he was coming from. I walked down the steps to the line of enforcers who kept the crowds back. The dais was nice to see the entire crowd, but not for communicating on the same level as my people.

When I walked by Enforcer Markus he made a sound similar to a bird squawking. I glanced at him to see worry lining the plains of his forehead. I gave him a slight smile, hoping he could trust me as I trusted him.

"May I know your name, master?" I asked. The man looked up with wide eyes to see me standing before him, then quickly got down on a knee.

"Master Helm at your service, Mistress," he said.

"Your family are traders. Of what district?" The tribe was split into ten districts which were rings around the Matriarch's Palace. The First through Sixth were nearer to the center of the town, the last two were on the edges and were normally either hunters or Reds. But districts Seventh and Eighth were typically those who were of lesser means.

"We are Seventh District, Mistress."

He hung his head further, were that possible. This man was humble, willing to come beg for options when he saw he couldn't support his family.

"This world needs more men like you," I whispered for his ears only.

He glanced up, his eyes wide and bald head glistening with sweat.

Ran? I asked.

With pleasure, she said.

"My dragon sheds scales every so often, and I hadn't known what to do with them. Do you believe your family could find places to put them to use?"

"D-Dragon scales, m'lady?" he whispered, his poor hat being squeezed so hard I feared it would tear. "I—I do not know if we are qualified—" He cut himself off, his voice choking as if he couldn't believe it.

I bent down to his level. "Master, we aren't taking away your trade. My Reds will still hunt. It'll just be a different kind, of those who are too far gone and a danger to society. We'll find a way for you to provide for your family, alright? My scribe will ensure you're welcome in my household to bring concerns. Thank you for coming and for being willing to change even if it terrifies the heck out of you."

He gave a nervous chuckle, glancing up and then back down, bowing down with his forehead flat on the floor. A tiny mewl came from my lips and made him pause. "Master Helm, I just got down here so we'd be on equal ground. Please rise, I'm no freakin' different from you. I serve Source and try to do what's right for

myself and my family and friends; my family and friends just consist of a few more people than most," I said with a wry smile.

Those around wore shocked expressions. A few were nodding. Others looked like they'd stab me if they could.

One who was reaching for something beneath his cloak was interrupted when Shen stepped behind him. I saw the dude's eyes widen before he slowly lifted his hands out of his pockets. Shen whispered in his ear. The dude paled before Shen walked away, blending with the crowd that didn't even know they had Sicario Hood in their midst.

I stifled a smile as the next question was called up.

Change was coming, even if not everyone embraced it.

Shen

THE PEOPLE LOVED HER. I am unsure she saw it.

Her laugh was contagious, and the little girl who had just given her a tiny flower smiled up at my Little Red as if she had hung the moon.

The people were drawn to her as a dragon is to a flame. She answered questions, entertained the crowd with her sharp wit, and put a few in their places with pointed questions that made even the tallest blacksmith look away in shame.

It was a beauty to behold. But she grew weary, her smile more forced, and her fingers clenching and unclenching around her blades.

I told the scribe to cut the last few short for tomorrow. He nodded, speaking with them discreetly. I approved his methods. If Alia knew some questions were unanswered this day, she would stay until she fainted attempting to satisfy those who would not be satisfied.

A man stepped up beside me. I had seen him around, and many showed him a respect beyond his station as Head Enforcer. He wore the Red's hood, but it was down and he had on chain mail armor with a bow across his back. An emblem of the Ambrose flower was on his shoulder. He stood beside me for a moment, his silence one of thoughtfulness.

Then he spoke. "Will she take her own safety seriously?"

I snorted in amusement. "No," I said.

He nodded. "She seems to be handling this well."

I glanced over at the man. He had his hair pulled back in a queue and braided. It was a silver mixed with dark black, and his green eyes were sharp despite his years. This was a fellow warrior, and one even I would fear as an enemy. "Does she trust you?" I asked at last.

He blinked as if I'd surprised him. "No," he said. "There are few she trusts."

A smirk tipped my lips.

He turned to stare at me, his eyes seeking—and finding—some blades I had hidden about my being. I quirked a brow. "But she trusts you, Wolf," he said without scorn. It was merely a statement of fact.

"She should be careful about those she trusts," I replied.

A tiny smile turned his lips, looking odd on such a severe face. "She has good instincts," he said.

It was my turn to be surprised. But he offered no more information.

"Is she handling *this* well?" he asked at last.

Ahhh. So that was the reason he sought me out. He cares for her in his own way. "No," I said.

His lips pursed. "She hides it well."

"*She* hides well."

He turned to look at me and bowed. "Thank you." He held out his forearm. We shook, exchanging a glance between two warriors.

He walked to guard Alia's back, and I felt a sense of peace. He would ensure her protection, both mentally and physically.

Soon, I would need to leave. He would do.

When the last question was asked and the last person exited the tent, I was at Alia's back, my eyes scanning the small crowd left and the shadows of the tent edges. There was no hint of danger.

"I need some time alone," she whispered.

My heart clenched, but I understood. She had been through much and we still had not spoken.

"I understand. What would you have me do while you are recovering?" I asked.

She glanced over at me as if surprised. "Could you watch over my family? Ran needs a break to hunt."

I smiled and bowed. "It would be my pleasure. Thank you for asking, Alia. They will be safe until your return."

She nodded, her eyes glassing over just a bit as her mental energy declined rapidly. I wished to ask her if she needed a hug, but I needed to respect that she asked for friendship. And right then, she wanted me away from her.

Lycus whimpered in pain.

I know, bud. I know. But she trusts us enough to ask for help.

His pain lessened, but was still there. We feared she would reject us when she knew.

As would be her right.

"She needs someone to sit with her. She may not wish to speak, but please sit with her," I whispered as I slowed my walk behind the man in the Red hood.

Enforcer Markus paused, glancing up at me. He saluted me with a fist to his heart and bowed before following Alia into the woods. I waited until I could no longer hear her light footsteps crunch through the underbrush before I left to guard her family.

Alia

The rest of the questions weren't so easy to soothe as the first. Many came with problems that rose from being unable to continue their trade—some made figurines out of werewolf bone, which made Shen growl—and some were just unhappy about having to allow werewolves and dragons and unicorns in their streets.

And others, I had no answers for. One questioned why we had hunted magic at all. I didn't know. I needed to ask Grandma, but I was avoiding the Matriarch's Palace like the plague infested its halls. Who knew, maybe that was closer to the truth than I realized.

Another asked if Reds were being disbanded since there was no place for them, but I told him they were to protect instead of hunt. He asked if that still meant killing, and again, I had no answer.

For rogues who were beyond saving, yes. But others? It would likely depend on the extent of their crimes, though I wasn't entirely sure we were the ones to be judge and executioner any longer.

I wasn't sure if we were even going to *be* assassins anymore. We would still hunt rogues and unicorns who went after humans. There were still dangerous magical creatures who needed to be killed and humans who still needed to be rescued. But what about the citizens of the cities? Did we have any right to end their existence because we deemed them dangerous?

After, I ventured beyond the city and into the woods, finding my log and my safe place. The gentle shush of the little stream through the center of the clearing brought a sense of peace. In the very center, my other sister's willow tree spread its boughs, providing a home for tiny fairies and birds alike. This was where I came to remember her and clear my head. And it was where I had met with Shen before Graham turned me in.

Everything had changed since that fateful night.

The overwhelm was growing. Nothing had prepared me for facing the problems of a people displaced and lied to for hundreds of years. I was tired. Burdened by all that had happened and all that I had to do.

I felt eyes on me. Enforcer Markus was in the woods, giving me some semblance of privacy. I gritted my teeth but bore it, knowing

my safety was not about me anymore, but about the tribe. If I died, the matriarchy would return to Grandma.

That would erase everything we'd worked so hard for.

"May I sit?" I glanced back to see Enforcer Markus had exited the woods to come within ten feet of where I sat.

I furrowed my brows then jerked my chin in a tiny nod. He sat a good few feet from me, resting his bow against his leg. His eyes never left the woods. In a way, it was nice to have someone near.

Enforcer Markus said nothing, he just sat, keeping watch over the wildflowers growing in the small basin of my special place.

I slowly relaxed. It was weird having him watch me from the shadows of the trees. This felt more like friends sitting in the woods.

"What do you think about the changes I've implemented?" I asked at last, picking apart a leaf before reaching for another, letting the small pieces flutter from my hands.

He glanced over at me, his eyes a deep green that nearly matched the trees swaying overhead. His black and silver hair was pulled back in a braided queue. There was an old scar on his nose that made it seem like lightning tried to cut his nose in half. "Do you wish me to make you feel better or give honesty?" he asked at last.

A chuckle bubbled from my lips. "Honesty, please."

A tiny smirk crossed his lips before he looked away. "Felt you'd ask for such. It's *different*."

I scrunched up my nose. "And?" I prodded.

"Patience, madame," he said, a tiny smile reaching his eyes even if it didn't pass his lips. "You are what this tribe needs, if not entirely going about it the proper way."

I leaned forward. "Can you tell me more?"

He sighed, leaning his elbow against the inside of his knee, his eyes still watching but also seeming not to see the swaying of the trees or the flutter of fairy wings darting between the flowers and grasses.

"You handle everything with grace and compassion, but should you give too much, the others will become jealous and there will be a power struggle to see who can get the most from you," he said at last.

I nodded. “You’re speaking of Master Helm?”

“I am.”

“Do you know of a better way?”

He sighed, his eyes coming to rest on my face. “Yours is the duty of leadership, madame. It is not so simple as a better way, but perhaps a *different* way. What you did was an excellent introduction to your rule. They understand now that you will be much different from your grandmother. But you must not be seen as a bleeding heart, or the vultures will come to peck to see what they may make bleed.”

That was the most words I had ever heard Enforcer Markus speak. “Thank you,” I said, staring at the willow without seeing it.

He bowed and then we sat in companionable silence until I was ready to return.

CHAPTER 32

Critters of All Kinds (and Heads)

ALIA

The *needs* were expanding. I was not only feeling *needs* from those within my tribe, but those from animals in the woods and even lost children or those who were hurt and without homes. All their *needs* were *drawn* to me.

"Wait!" I screamed, racing forward as I felt a *need* scrape against my soul.

The archer in the trees paused. I stopped within ten feet of a stocky creature shaped like an alligator… with three heads. It was a baby hydra, dehydrated and far from her home in the woods outside of the swamplands to the east beyond Wintercrest, which spanned hundreds of thousands of acres.

She already had a single arrow in her hide from Reds trying to force her to flee. She had cuts and missing scales. A tiny mewl came from one of her heads. One head was on the ground, eyes closed as if sleeping, the second was listless, waving back and forth, and the center head was watching me through narrowed eyes. It hissed, but I was used to things like that from Ran, and it didn't bother me coming from something that was only big enough to fit my arm in its mouth, not my entire body.

"Hey there, little one. You're safe with me, ok? Let's get ya looked after and then we'll get you home." She blinked, her hiss dying in her throat. Ran landed at my back, leaning forward and booping noses with the center head.

The hydra rubbed her snout against Ran's, even as Ran tried to retreat.

There was no retreat. Ran sat there stiff as a board as the hydra came and rubbed her snout like an adoring cat all along her neck and chin.

I nearly chuckled.

Don't, Ran said, glaring down at me.

I said it anyway. *Looks like you've found yourself a wittle baby.*

Ran hissed at me, even as the hydra curled up beneath her wing and she covered the little one to shelter it.

"Brandt, would you mind getting Doc for me?" I asked.

I glanced back, only to find Brandt staring at the scene before him with an open mouth and hand on a bare sword outstretched before him. "Th-That's a hydra," he said.

"Yep. Exceptional skills of observation. Now go get Doc."

He glanced at me before his gaze went back to the sleeping hydra. "Enforcer Markus would kill me if I left you."

"I'll kill you if you don't," I said.

"Enforcer Markus is scarier."

"So help me—"

"I'll go, Lady Aurelia," another voice spoke up with humor coating it. Elder Vera emerged from the growing crowd behind Brandt. She smiled, watching me argue with Brandt. "It seems you do not have great need of a bodyguard, what with the dragon around," she said with a teasing grin.

I cracked a smile. "See!" I told Brandt. "I have Ran. No one will harm me with her around. And *you* didn't even get between me and the hydra."

Brandt rolled his eyes. "I'd like to see anyone get between you and one of your *pets,* ma'am."

I choked on my spit. "Don't you *dare* call me ma'am. And they aren't my pets!"

Brandt stood at attention. "Enforcer Markus told me to hold post. I shall not disobey." He paused. Then added, "Ma'am."

I stared at him with a gaping mouth. I was unsure if I should throttle him or—

I saw the elder turn to get Doc from the corner of my eye. "Thank you, Elder Vera!" I yelled. She fluttered a hand in a wave as she trotted off to get Doc.

I glared at Brandt, who studiously turned his back on me and watched the crowd for any 'dangers.'

I turned back to the hydra, muttering about idiotic and self-centered jerks who wouldn't obey their matriarch over an enforcer.

More were coming. More *needs* converged on our tribe. Before too long, our tribe would no longer be hidden.

The biggest problem was most were not human. Most were magical creatures. There were humans with broken legs, horned rabbits with broken horns—their horns helped heal the land—and creatures with many injuries, illnesses, and diseases.

All converging on us.

Some never made it, their *needs* abruptly dropping from my soul as they crossed the veil to the other side of death.

It was alarming the way my Gift was like some sort of beacon to those with drastic *needs.*

"They're coming. From every direction and… and everywhere. I don't… I can't provide for 'em all," I said, my face in my arms. A horned rabbit crunched on a carrot in the corner, tempting Fenbutt who was told not to chase any small, injured creatures.

This certain little one had lost most of her horn, her eyes dull and glassy when she'd first arrived. She was coming back to life… a little too much, what with her teasing Fenbutt and getting him in trouble.

"No, hon, you can't. But we can," Mom said, turning to the others.

We were gathered for lunch. My family had descended on me, bringing my favorite foods just in time for my stomach to be grumbly.

Someone had tattled, telling them I hadn't been eating. I glanced at Shen in the corner. He sent what I imagined was supposed to be an innocent grin but ended up being a bit scary what with his scars and dark, glittering eyes.

I narrowed my eyes at him. His grin grew impish.

Heck.

"We need a functional team for the *needs* coming in. Trusted individuals to get the people and creatures to different areas to receive what they're needing," Anna said.

I stared at her for a moment. My sister was better. Slowly growing stronger and healthier. She still had days where breathing was hard, and Dad still had to carry her or risk her legs collapsing, but she was here. Talking and eating *with* us.

I exchanged a glance with Dad, who nodded and tipped his hat at me. I smiled.

"Wow. That would be a big help, sis."

She sent me a bland glance. "You sound surprised such genius came from me."

"Not surprised, just—"

"Surprised?" She laughed.

"Shen, get over here and help before my sister slays me!"

"She already has," Shen replied, not moving from his post by the door.

"Slayed by wit," Jacob said with a sage nod.

He and Shen exchanged a grin as I groaned. Shen's eyes softened with the smile; he almost looked younger for a moment in time. I saw the boy in his eyes, the one he wasn't allowed to be. Maybe we could give him some of that missing childhood back.

Fenbutt, parked at Shen's feet like usual, barked and wagged his tail. The rabbit darted in front of him, her little gray tail wiggling as she paused to see if he'd chase. He watched but held still despite his whimpers and flicking ears.

Warmth gathered in my soul. *Needs* still beat against me, yet somehow, having my family and friends here helped them fade. As if they were bearing part of the load without even realizing it.

"Son, take a break from your duty and join us in breaking bread," Dad said.

Shen glanced at him with surprise on his face. He glanced out the door, as if searching for an escape route. Was he… scared? Of my father?

What man is not afraid of his beloved's sire?

Fair point. But we weren't… I wasn't—

Keep lying to yourself, Two-Legs.

I would, thanks.

Shen moved from his post, slowly coming over to the seat Jacob pulled up for him with a massive grin.

Fenbutt grumbled over his master leaving. He then stretched and yawned before going over to Fina, who was sleeping on a pallet on the floor, her sister cuddling her. Fenbutt curled up in front of them, immediately releasing a round of gas that sent Shen into a coughing fit. Jacob leaned away.

"Wow, that's rotten," Jacob said, waving a hand in front of his face.

"You ain't wrong," Jess whispered, still cradling a sleeping Fina who merely crinkled her nose and rolled over.

The rabbit darted over and snuggled up just beneath Fenbutt's snout.

Fenbutt opened his mouth, easing it over the little rabbit's skull.

He glanced up, catching my eye. I raised a single brow. He deflated, releasing a low grumble before easing his mouth back and closing it—without the rabbit within—and sticking his snout as far from the rabbit as possible. He kicked out a back foot that sent the rabbit tumbling away from him. When the fluffball stopped rolling, she huffed then went around to the other side of the pile and curled up next to Jess with a disgruntled stomp of her foot.

"How can we make Anna's idea happen?" Mom said.

"We can section out areas in the Matriarch's Tent. They can separate groups based on Alia's classifications of their needs. We can have acute physical, chronic physical, and acute mental. Anything else I need to add, sis?" Jacob said, writing in a book.

I stared at my little brother. My family… they were… they were rallying together. For me.

I coughed, trying to remove the tightness of my throat. "Yeah… that would be great. Please also add a hug station with gentle souls who can listen. So many people and creatures just need kind physical and emotional connection without pain."

Jacob nodded and wrote it down.

"I can get the Reds to gather and set up partitions in the tent. But who helps the people? We need those who won't hold a grudge from the past or try to harm those coming to us for help," Dad said.

Shen leaned forward. "My pack will be happy to assist. Doc has a few werewolves who are skilled in healing. Are there any in the tribe who would be willing and kind enough to let the past lay in the past?" Shen asked.

I hid my smile. He spoke, and it made me happy.

"Isn't there a pacifist group? They still aren't entirely on Alia's side, seeing as she hasn't outlawed hunting for meat of the forest critters, but they'll be much more willing to help than most," Mom said, dishing out shepherd's pie onto my plate.

I put a spoonful in my mouth without thinking. "Do you know how to reach them? I have a feeling they wouldn't take too kindly to me showing up at their doorstep."

Mom narrowed her eyes. "*What* did you do?"

I winced. "Me and Brandt *might* have put a unicorn pelt outside their main entrance when we were kids."

Mom facepalmed. "What am I to do with you rascals?" she asked. Dad was leaning back with a grin when Mom glanced up. He quickly put on a face of faux disappointment.

"Alia, you know better," he said.

"Of course I know better *now*, Dad. But back then, they were annoying as heck."

Dad shrugged. Mom smacked his shoulder. He jumped. "Woman, you know she's right! They *were* annoying as heck."

"And they were the closest thing to right, despite going against the wind."

Dad nodded. "You're exactly right, baby."

Mom crossed her arms. “Are you pacifying me?”

Dad scoffed. “Of course I am. But you *are* right.”

Mom cracked a grin, going back to filling up my plate, which I’d emptied.

Shen had a tiny grin on his face as he ate more of Mom’s pie. His eyes nearly glowed as he demolished the food. “This is the best meal I have had the pleasure of in ages, madame,” he said, nodding his head in a slight bow to Mom.

Mom blushed. “Thanks, dear. Have some more.” For a moment, it looked as if he would protest, but Mom was already piling more on his plate.

I hid a grin at his dumbfounded expression. Then he softened, and there was a hint of moisture in the bottom of his eyes before he looked down.

My smile mellowed. My family was a lot, but they were family. And it brought a strange warmth to my heart to see how they welcomed Shen. His responses to even the tiniest of family care nearly tore my heart in two.

Shen turned to me. His brow rose at the tiny smile on my lips, but I just shook my head and shrugged ’cause I didn’t know how to explain the peace and joy in my soul. His smile softened and he nodded. A thoughtful frown crossed his face.

“There are also those you *feel* outside the tribe, correct?” Shen asked me, his eyes darting back and forth as if he were thinking.

“Yes. Many don’t make it. I think only the most dire *needs* are coming. But why would my Gift draw them? Nothing like this has happened before.”

“I’ve long wondered if the broken are drawn to you, kiddo. You may not remember, but there was a tiny puppy who’d lost a leg and was bleeding out. You found ’em on our porch when you were a mere toddler and knew exactly how to help. It was when we first suspected you had a Gift,” Dad said, rubbing his chin in thought. “You mentioned your Gift expanded when you accepted the three items. Could it be…” He exchanged a glance with Mom.

She nodded. “It’s possible.”

"What's possible?" I asked, a bit peeved at their silent conversation.

Mom turned to me. "There was an old legend about the Trident. The Book, the Crown, and the Sword. It was an obscure rumor about 'em somehow being items of power."

I stared at Mom. "Why didn't you say anything about this *before*? It could've been freakin' useful!"

She shrugged. "You were all very young when it went around, and the Reds quickly shut it down."

"So it has something to do with the three items given to the matriarch? Could they be spelled like the Book of Rites?" Anna asked, leaning back in her chair as her face grew a bit pale. I asked her with my eyes if she needed to go rest; she shook her head slightly.

When I glanced up, Shen's eyes met mine, filled with understanding.

He turned back to Mom. "It is possible. The mages of old were greater in power than those of today. A way to augment a ruler's Gifts to make it serve the people would not be out of the question," Shen said.

"There's a legend about the first matriarch that said she had a way with words. Perhaps it augmented a Gift no one knew about?" Jacob asked. "I 'member hearing about how she talked down an entire city guard from invading. They left the tribe alone after, as if they'd forgotten we were even here." I nodded. Matriarch Victoria the Truthsayer was a tale we were often told as kids.

Shen whistled. "That would explain much. Your tribe is close to Mongolia. You would be seen as a threat. You do not know how many times the king and princes have suspected the Reds are close to the capitol, but even their greatest trackers could not confirm this. And they should have. Many times over. This is not a mere tribe, but an entire city hidden in the woods. A geas laid over the tribe would be understandable and even probable."

I furrowed my brow and nibbled my bottom lip. A geas was typically of fea kind. They used a geas to either prevent someone from speaking of or remembering certain details. I didn't realize it

could actually be a *good* thing. But with my Gift… "Does this… Could my Gift undo that? It's bringing people and creatures to us left and right."

Shen shook his head, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. Seeing him at ease made a smile tease my lips. "I am trained to resist geas and other magic. It's the only way I can find my way back here after leaving. That, and your scent. Remembering the way back after leaving is a bit of a muddled mess. Were it not for those two things combined, I could not have returned to you. So no, your Gift draws them here, but after they leave, it would be near impossible to find it again."

"Good. Would hate to undo centuries of peace because everyone's blasted drawn to me," I said. Shen chuckled, catching my morbid humor. I rubbed my hands together, thinking of who could head this up. "Markus and Brandt are two I trust. Get them to set up a team of those they trust and let's get this started. The sooner, the better."

"Good. Would your Reds be keen to go on rescue missions for the injured who cannot make it here?" Shen asked.

I stared at him for a moment. Then I cackled with glee and got up without a backward glance.

"She's up to something," Anna said.

"That look on her face terrifies me," Jacob said, his voice wavering.

"The look of innocent chaos?" Shen said, not without a hint of dark sarcasm.

"Yep, that one," Jacob replied.

CHAPTER 33

The Needs of Many

SHEN & ALIA

Shen

The Reds were runners. The creatures they brought back determined their ranks. If the critter or person was well cared for, they would rise.

Ranks were called Blades. With this new system, she gave the Reds something to do while also providing them a way to gain rank —without the killing.

No one could take away the overwhelming guilt when your hands were coated in the blood of both the innocent and the guilty, but saving people helped ease the burden of what had been done.

Yet, even with extra assistance, it was too much. Alia was the focal point of the entire system. She wrote down the *needs* of those in the woods and where to find them, then she evaluated them before they went to the proper people in the Matriarch's Tent. It helped having people to send the individuals to. Doc had quite the contacts. He sent over twenty nurses and many of the healers he'd trained to assist with the injured. Many of those were older people who my pack had tossed out. Strange how the pack thought they would be stronger without them.

Even with that, Alia was the crux of everything, and it was wearing on her. Especially those she couldn't save.

She was running herself into the dust, and the needs just kept coming. Many found their own way here. Some were put down by Reds before the she-wolf came out to play, and the entire community of Reds became acutely aware of how dangerous a protective Alia could become.

I watched as the people once more gravitated toward her on what was quickly becoming known as Meet Day. It was the last three days of the week when Alia would meet with her people face to face to hear their problems. And she would meet their needs, if she was able.

She paused in the middle of speaking with a shop owner who was demanding a dragon scale since his business was failing.

Alia reminded him of the debt he'd incurred due to gambling. He had went on a yelling spree that had lasted much longer than I would have allowed, but that was Alia's call.

The shop owner used this to step into Alia's space. I stepped forward and grabbed him by the nape and jerked him back. He took a sloppy swing at me, and I casually grabbed his throat.

"Leave or die," I growled into his ear, being careful to keep my fingers from snapping his neck. Poor humans. They were easier to snap than twigs.

I stepped back and dropped him, allowing Lycus to show in the hint of my eyes.

He fell to the ground, crab-walking backward and screaming about dangerous beasts. Enforcer Markus was right behind Alia with a hand on his blade. He gave me a nod. We both knew he was prepared to deal with the man if I had not. We both also knew I would allow no other to care for Alia while I was around.

Alia took no heed of her surroundings as she put a hand over her heart, hiding a wince.

Her eyes cleared and she took off. The crowd parted for her. She ran with Markus and me on her heel. People stopped to stare, but then Alia darted down a side alley which was nearly hidden by two shops whose keepers stared with wide eyes as we bypassed the main thoroughfare of the market. She took turns with an unerring

sense of direction, leading us to the woods near the western end of the city.

Markus gave a low whistle when we saw what had drawn Alia.

A massive sphinx was clacking her beak at ten Reds who had her surrounded. She sported four arrows in her wings and chest. They were attached to stakes in the ground. Her humanlike eyes were filled with pain and desperation over a beak-like nose. She had the body of a lion with the wings of an eagle. She was massive, nearly rivaling Ran in size. Her tail slapped at her flanks.

"Stand down!" Alia screamed, her voice sent with a massive wave of power which even Lycus wished to bow before.

The Reds stepped back, and that was when I saw two other smaller bundles of fur and feathers separated from the massive sphinx by a ring of Reds. Two baby sphinxes clacked their sharp beaks in warning at the surrounding Reds. One sphinx stepped in front of the other and spread his wings to protect the smaller one of the two. They were about the size of dogs.

A Red glared at us with a sneer on his face. The Red stared at Alia with a tiny smile as he stepped forward and drove his blade through the side of the little one protecting his sibling. The baby sphinx released a massive screech which the mother rebounded tenfold, struggling against her hold.

He should not have done that.

Alia released a war cry that would make a werewolf proud. She sprinted the last ten feet, moving with lithe grace.

The Red's eyes narrowed as he turned to meet her. Her blade crashed into his. She stabbed his arm with her other dagger, and when he dropped his blade, she stabbed him through the neck. His eyes widened. He gurgled with surprise, fear, and betrayal stark in his eyes.

Alia had tears in her eyes as she retracted her blade.

"We no longer harm innocent creatures." Her voice echoed amongst the trees. She turned with hardened eyes and blood splattered on her chin. "I am a forgiving matriarch, but I am *done* forgiving those who harm innocents who are coming to us for help. Do *not* harm those who do not harm you first."

The snarl in her voice caused the surrounding Reds to drop to a knee.

"You're drooling," Markus said dryly.

I closed my mouth. He chuckled. I bit back a growl.

Alia pointed at a Red and told her to get Doc. Alia eased over to the little sphinx who was lying on the ground, his tiny whimpers hurting even my cold heart.

I stepped over.

"Free the mother. I will care for him," I told her.

Alia glanced up at me and blinked. It took a moment for her to realize she was frozen, her hands stained with blood from both the dead Red and the little sphinx.

The little sphinx stopped hissing and blinked up at me when I neared. The human emotion there nearly broke me. He did not understand why he had been harmed for protecting those he loved.

Neither did I.

I pressed against the wound in his side and soothed him with a low purr. He responded better than expected, relaxing into the ground and lifting his wing so I could better see the wound.

It was an ugly, jagged hole in his side. I packed it with clean cloth that I kept on hand. It was soaked with yarrow powder to help the wound clot.

The smaller sphinx was a tiny ball, her wings covering her head as she shivered with fear.

A low keen came from above me. I turned to find Alia before the massive sphinx. It would be a boon to have Ran around, but I suspected Alia asked her to stay away to make them feel less threatened.

Alia released the ropes. The mother sphinx stopped clacking her beak. Alia bowed before the massive creature and set her forehead on the ground. "I am deeply sorry for how you have been treated. I have no right to ask, but please allow us to help you and your little ones. It will be my personal goal to care for you and yours until you may choose a pathway forward to whatever destination you desire."

The sphinx flapped her wings, glanced at me caring for her pups, then bent down and booped her nose against Alia's bowed head.

Alia looked up and smiled. She reached up a hand and set it on the creature's beak. The sphinx released a massive sigh that fluttered Alia's hair. Alia rose and put her hands around the sphinx's neck, unable to reach halfway around.

The sphinx melted. Tears dropped from the mother's eyes as Alia embraced her.

The baby sphinx beneath me released a tiny moan as I pressed tighter against the wound. "Forgive me, little one. You will be cared for," I said, to which he relaxed.

A massive wave of displaced air settled above me. I glanced up to the mother, who stared at me with mistrust.

"Should I release him, he will bleed out," I said, meeting her eyes with understanding. I showed her my neck, allowing her to see I was no threat to her or her babe and would allow her to kill me easily should she wish it.

She pushed her beak against my head. A tiny, unmanly squeak escaped me.

A giggle came from just beside the sphinx. Alia covered her mouth with her hand, but her eyes were dancing with laughter.

My pride took a hit, and I ducked my head to hide the redness of my cheeks, but if my embarrassment was able to make her eyes sparkle, I would make such a fool of myself a thousand times over.

Doc arrived in a bustle of energy and took over, getting the wounds field dressed and bleeding stopped before he directed them through the city toward the Matriarch's Tent.

The sphinx followed Alia through the city as placid as a draft horse with its master, although her back reached halfway up the two-story shops.

I stood guard outside the massive tent as Alia and Doc got the sphinxes settled, watching the people around us. What was once a human Red village was quickly becoming a melting pot of wild magical creatures and humans. The humans of the village were a bit uncertain at first, and a few had fought with the new creatures, but overall, co-existing was going much smoother than should have been possible.

Just outside the massive tent were unicorns munching on grass along the cobblestones, human and werewolf children running and playing at their feet. Horned rabbits hopped along the pathways of gardens, causing massive surges in growth since their magical inclination was to assist in plant growth when they were happy.

Alia placed recovering horned rabbits with farmers who grew food, and it was causing a massive upsurge in the food supply.

Elves were rare, but one limped from the tent and nodded to me before heading over to a human on the other side of the market. The human's eyes nearly glowed when she spotted the elf, and her smile made his steps quicken. Meanwhile, another human hmphed and mouthed a curse against evil.

A large part of this integration was due to Alia sensing needs before they became explosive. She gave a family of nine flour and meat and a horned rabbit with seeds to grow before they starved to death. She hugged an elderly woman before she sought retribution on a werewolf for the death of her son.

I stalked the streets during the night, ensuring no one caused trouble while my Red slept. I had busted a few heads, accidentally stolen a few fingers, and knocked some sense into a werewolf who was attempting to steal from a shopkeeper.

Through it all, Alia remained strong. A few weeks passed and her nightmares worsened. She hardly slept, and the only time I could speak with her was when she was slumped before a fire eating dinner prior to being carted her off to bed by me.

She was killing herself, and I didn't know what to do about it.

And I had to leave.

Mother's Command was insistent, and it could overtake me should I not listen. It tugged like a string. She had sent me for the matriarch who was no longer matriarch, so it did not matter much this month. But she had a Command over me to report on every full moon, which would be when her three Commands were restored. Anxiety coiled in my gut like a sleeping serpent.

I told Alia I had to leave the day before the Blood Moon, as it was the first day of the full moon. She nodded, though I was not certain she even heard me.

Head Enforcer Markus gave me a nod on my way out. He was one of the few I trusted to protect her while I was gone.

It nearly broke me to leave, but it would be absolutely devastating should I be unable to return.

Alia

THE BABY SPHINX died in my arms. His sister was recovering, but this baby… he was too emaciated and the wound was too deep. Not even Doc nor a mage stone could save him. Even mage stones weren't all-powerful, nor could it save us from the eventual end that comes for all.

I gently closed his eyes and kissed his little bird head. The feathers were coarse and hard beneath my lips. Most legends said the sphinx had the head of a woman, but these guys had the head of an eagle and a scrunched beak that could almost be seen as human from the right angle. But the eyes... The eyes were undeniably human. They conveyed human emotion. Like fear. Pain. And utter sorrow and betrayal.

The child's last expression would be branded into my mind's eye for eternity.

Doc set a hand on my shoulder and I jumped, a blade in my hand before I could blink. I stared up at his light-blue eyes behind his glasses. Understanding swam in them.

He saw my pain. He felt it.

"I'm sorry…," I began, my voice breaking as I sheathed the blade.

"You have nothing to apologize for, my dear. I startled you, so I should apologize."

I nodded, turning back to the babe. I would have to tell his mother. After all she'd been through, she may die of a broken heart.

"Why?" I whispered.

"Why what, Alia?" Doc asked in a gentle voice.

"Why can we not save them? We know their needs. We have every resource available. But even with everything here, we still lost him." My voice choked off as my soul screamed. Everything was hitting so quickly. Shen had left, Elder Pulma had just told me off for using so many of our resources for a dead man's errand and not giving enough to *our* people. And now, the little guy we fought so hard to save…

My heart was already broken. Now, it shattered as if an anvil had been dropped on a broken chalice.

"Who is in charge of this world, Alia?" Doc said.

"Source," I replied without a second thought.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him nod as he took a seat. We were in a cordoned-off cubby in the Matriarch's Tent, which looked nothing like it once did. Where there was a dias and large open area before, now there were about thirty cordoned off areas for the sickly and four large areas for intake of the sickly where some of the larger creatures had to remain. There were healers, nurses, helpers, assistants, huggers, and everything in between running around between those cordoned off areas within these walls. We sequestered the different areas with skins and sheets—literally whatever we could find to give some privacy to those coming to us with needs.

It was beautiful. And it was dreadful. Thus was the life of a Giver.

"And who is the master of life and death?" Doc asked, bringing me back to the present.

"The Creator," I said.

He nodded, leaning forward and rubbing the little sphinx's head with his thumb before sitting back and wiping a tear from his eye. "So many times, we like to think ourselves more than we are, little one. You see, if we believe we are responsible for the death, we can change it by doing better in the future so it doesn't happen again, right?" He shook his head, turning to meet my eyes with tears floating in the bottom of his lids. "But dearest one, we can only do so much. The actual healing is not in our hands, but in the hands of

the one who loves us most." He took out a handkerchief and wiped his eyes. "That doesn't mean it doesn't hurt. What we feel and do is still valid, but in the end, we are not the ones responsible for the ultimate healing. All we can do is our very best, and the rest, we must put into Source's hands for safekeeping."

I bent my head over the little sphinx's head, giving him one last squeeze. "Fly high with my grandpa, little one. Let him know I love him. I entrust you to the one who made you now," I whispered, my bottom lip trembling.

I closed his sightless eyes and stood.

I glanced over at Doc, who was staring into the distance, as if seeing those who he had lost in times before. He knew my pain, but he also knew how to surrender what's not our burden to carry. "Thank you," I whispered.

He glanced up with a sad smile.

I walked out, hoping this death wouldn't cause another and knowing that that ultimately wasn't in my hands. I was doing my absolute best, giving all I could. I would entrust the rest to Source.

That night, as I cuddled the little baby female sphinx who was slowly recovering, she looked at me with eyes so trusting and so gentle that my heart both melted and even mended just a bit.

Perhaps we didn't do it for the ones we lost along the way, although we would always carry them in our hearts. Perhaps we did it for those who lived.

The mother's cries had caused a building to collapse. It fell on a mother and daughter, and it was only thanks to the werewolves' strength that we got them out. The mother's leg couldn't be saved.

Guilt made my heart squeeze in my chest. Many blamed me.

Unrest gathered, and I wasn't sure if my people were going to follow me much longer.

CHAPTER 34

A Broken Glass

ALIA

Why does something so simple feel so hard?

The door leading into the Matriarch's Palace seemed to tower above me. The door was a plain, simple wood grain, but was higher than two of me put together. There were carvings of figures in cloaks fighting werewolves, dragons, unicorns—you name nearly any magical being, and they were there. Around the outer edges of the doorframe was a twisting vine with Ambrose flowers interspersed throughout.

Brandt stood at my back, frowning up at the massive home with brown pillars of support for the upper stories and guards stationed around the upper balconies.

The quiet unsettled me the most. Even deep in the woods, there were sounds of critters, whistling breezes through the trees, and howls of wolves and other predators in the distance. There was none of that here. Instead, there was a stillness, a calm before a storm.

Before I lost my nerve, I counted to five and then opened the door. The two enforcers stationed there bowed their heads as I walked inside. Before me spread a massive red runner that lead to a throne—the matriarch's throne. Twin spirals of light-grain wooden stairs on either side of the massive entry hall led to a balcony that spanned most of the second floor. High above was a ceiling made of intertwining branches with entire trees as pillars of support. It was a mixture of dark and dreary and warm and welcoming depending on

if you looked at the massive ceiling or the red runner leading to the throne.

There were multiple doors leading from this room to other wings of the house, wings that I never much cared to explore. Mom moved us out of here at the first opportunity, and we've lived by our own means since. I still remembered what I supposed was a nursery of sorts, where I'd first been wounded by Grandma's hand when she found I'd climbed onto a table and knocked off a precious vase.

"Granddaughter, how lovely it is for you to visit your dear old grandmother at long last." Grandma stared down from the second-floor balcony, and I could *feel* the way her eyes judged me although I couldn't see the pinch in her brow nor see the weight of her gaze.

She strode down the stairs wearing a crown on her head much larger than the one she wore when she was actually matriarch and a dazzling red gown with swirling hints of gold. Her gray hair was tied into a severe bun on top of her head, making the large crown with sparkling jewels much more pronounced. Her eyes glittered with something I couldn't name but thoroughly disliked.

I stared at her, hiding my trembling fingers in my cloak. "Grandma, you look well," I said.

"You do not. Is the weight too much to bear? I can always relieve you if you find it too burdensome."

I snorted. "And let you continue killing innocent creatures?"

Her smile didn't reach her eyes. "More's the pity. You cannot blame me for trying. Brandt, are you her mere bodyguard now? I had such high hopes for you."

Brandt remained silent, but his eyes went hard as flinted steel; it was a look I had seen very few times.

"Did you know about the original book?" I asked at last. If she did, if generations of Red matriarchs had just looked the other way while thousands of innocent creatures died… I didn't know what to make of that.

She stopped feet from me and stared at who I'd become—and found me lacking. "That is not the right question, *Matriarch*."

"Then what is?" I asked, frustration seeping through my words.

She turned from me, her gown gently brushing the ground as she walked down the red rug to the throne. She caressed the brown arm with her hand. The wood there was worn smooth, as if she had done so many times.

"You should ask why Reds would need to kill magical beings at all." She turned to stare at me.

I met her gaze, knowing she was going to make me ask. "Why would Reds need to kill magical beings?"

"There is an imbalance in this world. Magical creatures came through a portal opened by a young man who did not understand what he was doing. The portal was not closed for over one hundred years. This created an unbalanced ecosystem where the magical creatures slowly killed off many animals vital to the livelihood of humans. Then many began hunting humans themselves."

"Which is why we were taught all magical beings are evil…"

Grandma shook her head. "Not evil. Just wrong for this place. Wrong for this world. They belong where they belong, which is not here. And this is why I took it upon myself to create a more balanced world. A world of goodness, where everyone's needs were met. One where humans can flourish and the invasive species are kept in check by predators."

I stared at her. "These are living creatures."

"When the massive snakes from across the seas came, you did not object when the werewolves naturally moved in to eat them, correct? It was a natural process. Imagine if no werewolves were here to keep them in balance? It would have toppled our ecosystem." She paused, staring into the distance before jerking her eyes back to me. "We are the werewolves. We ensure balance is kept. And without us, the human kingdoms would have long ago fallen to the whims of the magical invasion."

I was more confused than before. She actually *believed* what she was saying. In some ways, I saw her side. "But they aren't a single invasive species. They are many, most of whom came over with their own forms of checks and balances. Many even made this world better—"

"Those who made it better were by far less than those who did not. You have seen it, Aurelia. Do not try to ignore the children you have seen slain by monsters." She was right. The hollow eyes of dead children were seared into my mind, their bodies mutilated.

"Then why try to exterminate all magic?"

She smiled. "You know better by now, Granddaughter. It was never about exterminating magic; it was about bringing back the balance to this world that was interrupted long ago—and making it better."

I WALKED from the palace more confused than when I'd went in. I went searching for answers only to get more questions.

Did Grandma truly believe we had to help achieve balance? I felt there was something more there, something buried beneath the 'why' she gave, and yet, it seemed she was telling the truth. I just didn't know how that truth translated in her mind.

Markus took over for Brandt.

"Later, ma'am," Brandt said.

I sent him a rude gesture, and he saluted. I shook my head, a smile teasing at my lips for the first time since exiting the palace.

My feet turned to the massive tent and the creatures there. I understood them. They were simple. They liked some and disliked others. There were no games, no questioning. They just were.

The sphinx bowed her head to me as I walked in. I set a hand on her beak. "Hey there, beautiful."

She trilled, the feathers at her neck standing on end with the sound. Her eyes told me her grief was still raw, but that she would make it. That's all I wanted. Her little one *needed* her now. They needed each other.

I went to her baby, picking her up and scratching the feathers beneath her beak. She warbled in happiness. She curled up in my arms, her big blue eyes staring up at me with questions I couldn't

answer. So I kissed her fuzzy little head and rocked her until she slept.

"Matriarch!" Brandt called out.

"In here!" I said, trying to keep my voice low so as not to wake the baby sphinx.

Brandt came around the corner, Elder Vera at his heels.

"There's been a breech, Mistress. Graham and Verald have escaped," Elder Vera said, her long hair folding over her face as she doubled over to catch her breath.

I stared at her. It took a moment for my brain to catch up. "How?" I whispered. I gently eased the baby under her mother's wing, who looked at me with dull eyes. She nuzzled my hair with her sharp beak, being gentle with my thin skin.

I rose and walked outside, being careful to keep a lid on my panic as I nodded to a dryad who held the hand of an elf. I gave a quick hug to the center hydra head, Brandt and Elder Vera close behind me.

When I crossed the threshold and no one was about, I spun to Brandt and Elder Vera.

"How?" I snapped.

"The guards saw nothing. It is as if they disappeared into thin air," Elder Vera said, her eyes darting around as if they would come to attack us here and now. I doubted it. More than likely, they wouldn't strike until they thought we least expected it.

"Take the werewolf trackers. Hunt them down," I said.

"Yes, Mistress," Elder Vera said with a bow of her head.

She trotted off, huffing and puffing. "Go with her, Brandt. Ensure the safety of the werewolves and the Reds who follow the trail." I wished I could go personally, but I had other duties.

Brandt nodded. "Stay safe." He saluted to his heart before running to catch up with the elder.

I leaned against a tent post outside, watching the people dart in and out of the entrance. A man I hadn't seen before darted inside, his pale gray eyes briefly meeting mine. We were often conscripting new folk to help with the ever-changing needs.

"Can I help, madame?" Enforcer Markus asked, coming up behind me from his post by the door.

"No, Enforcer. Not with this," I said. Though leadership was a heavy burden, one I wasn't sure I could handle, it was mine to bear.

You aren't alone, Two-Legs. Lean on us when it becomes too much, Ran said.

A flap of wings came from above. A few children squealed and most darted away from the area, but otherwise, the people had become used to Ran mighty quickly. She carefully folded her wings back, reaching her long head down to nuzzle my chest.

"Hey, girl," I said, hugging her head and kissing her nose.

She leaned down so we were eye to eye. *Are you taking on too much?*

I scoffed. "I just sent Brandt off to find the traitors instead of going myself."

Her eye twinkled with mischief. She gently grabbed me with her front foot. I froze, uncertain of what she was doing.

"What are you—ACK!" I screamed as she lifted me from the dirt and leapt into the air. My stomach dropped as the ground fell away beneath us.

"Put me *DOWN*!" I shouted. "*Help!"* I shouted, but Enforcer Markus was zero help. He *saluted* Ran of all things before going back to his post, *smiling*. Markus does not smile. His eyes get mischievous and his lips may make a tiny quirk, but this was a full-on, white-teeth-glimmering freakin' *grin.*

"SO HELP ME YOU BIG LUMP OF SCALES!"

Ran craned her head down. I shrieked cause there was a tree coming up ahead. She swerved, missing it by inches—the crazy bag of bones—and *winking.*

You need a break. This is necessary.

"NECESSARY? PUT. ME. *DOWN*!"

The werewolf left me in charge of your mental capacity. You're empty. I'm here to assist.

I put my hands on the warm scales of her hand—paw?—trying not to look down. But it was freaking hard when you were hanging

in thin air at least thirty stories above the tree line, kicking your feet like a toddler having a tantrum.

Antagonistic, annoying beasts.

I once thought Ran and Shen would never join forces because they were both so stinkin' hard-headed and prickly on the outside. I was wrong. With those two in cahoots, I'd be sunk quicker than an earth golem in the ocean.

My shoulders slumped and a sigh passed my lips. "Where're we going?"

Ran snaked her head around—again not looking where she was going, but there were no trees ahead so I was less anxiety-prone—and mischief twinkled in her eyes.

Away.

CHAPTER 35

The Alpha

SHEN

"Mother." I bowed my head, putting my hands behind my back.

Beatrice lounged back on her glass throne. Her eyes were pinched. It was a small tell, but for her it was as loud as a shout. She was worried.

"Hello, son. Do you have tales to tell?" Command firmed her words and made my throat clench.

My mind no longer controlled the words erupting from my mouth. No, the Command wrestled control and my voice spoke without my permission. "The previous matriarch has been deposed, a new has gained the heirship to guide the tribe. She is set to ensure peace between our species and guides her people into reconciliation."

My mind clicked back into place, clearing from the haze of the Command. My body recoiled at the words I had just spoken.

Mother grinned. It was not a cheerful grin. It was one of triumph.

"Never have you spoken highly of another while in Command, my boy. Oh, how exciting!" She paused, leaning forward. I said nothing. "Too bad she must leave this world much too soon."

"She is human." My chest clenched. My body ached. No amount of pain stopped my heart from beating harder within my chest.

She cocked her head, her eyes turning golden. It was clear she did not believe me. "You love her, do you? I shall give you a choice. Your little menagerie of castoffs or *her*. All you must do is kill the little human and your castoffs will live. I am fair, am I not? Many

lives to trade for one? It is better than attempting to dispose your very own mother."

My bones ached with the cold flushing through me.

She snapped her fingers and a head was thrown on the floor. "This"—she gestured to the head at my feet with a frown —"attempted to assassinate me this past new moon. He was sent by the uncle of the princess herself. Our very own family! How very surprised I was to be informed it was by the hand of my very own son." Her eyes speared into mine, and her anger flared in a palpable aura. Lycus pushed back against her, just enough for her to know she was dealing with another Alpha. Her eyes brightened, as if I intrigued her. "You will be my heir until the day you die, little boy. Which will be a very long time."

Beatrice's eye twitched as I fought Lycus for control.

"Perhaps I won't make the deaths of your little castoffs immediate," Mother said, tapping her long fingernails against the glass throne on which she sat.

Even Beatrice stared at Mother. A scent rose from Mother. A sickly-sweet scent of insanity.

Blood streamed from my finger as I used pain to fight the fear and rage battling for dominance over my body. "Why threaten them when Command will ensure your words are carried out?" I asked, barely keeping Lycus in line. I felt him in my eyes. If they were golden, she would know. Based on Mother's sly grin, they were. To take a word from Alia—*heck.*

"Oh, ho. You care much more than I thought. For both the pack and the little human. It will be a great pleasure to ensure you prove your continued loyalty to this pack. Caring over much is the bane of rule. You will prove your loyalty in blood. And it will teach you." She came forward and tilted my chin up, disgust painting her face and making her fair features appear deranged. "Next time you wish to kill me, do it yourself." She returned to her throne, wiping off her hands.

"You will kill the current matriarch and make the people bow to you by any means necessary. I expect her heart laid at my feet by the falling of the Blood Moon on the first day." She paused, leaning

forward once more, her eyes glittering with pain. "Should you fail to procure the heart of mine enemy by sun-up the day after the Blood Moon, do not return."

Lycus fought. He howled in my mind as the Command seeped its claws into my mind, scalded past walls I had erected, and tangled into my being until I could not determine what was my will and what was the Command.

I bowed, turning to leave, my soul screaming.

But not before Beatrice tapped her throne thrice.

"SHE SAID she would not harm them."

The whisper came from my left. There, I saw a stocky, old, humpbacked man; his dark eyes were feminine, though. I had been waiting for her in our place in the market. The area stunk of refuse and rotting meat, but it was a good place to ensure no one heard our conversation because the people selling their wares were so very loud it hurt.

I continued browsing the potions. The owner of the stall was on the other side of the stall, helping a different patron. "And you believed her after what we have seen?"

"She is not all bad. She is trying her best, but it is hard."

"Hard? Hard is struggling and making wrong choices. It is not threatening her own pack members to force her son's hand, Beauty."

"She will not kill them," she said. I heard the doubt in her voice, even if she did not.

"She already has. She killed Matilda."

Beatrice froze. She rarely lost even that amount of control. She and Matilda had been close, once. Matilda had been more of a mother to us than our birth mother ever was.

"No." The slight hitch in her breath told me all I needed to know.

"Help me," I whispered.

She glanced over her shoulder. “What do you need?” Beatrice was a brat, but she was not evil. We had broken together during training. We had held each other together when father died. We were the only two who truly knew the person this world had lost when he left. Our siblings were kept out of our family’s dark secrets, but Beatrice as the eldest and me as the only son made us the two trained for assassination and rule. And Papa was the only one who kept us any sort of sane through all our mother’s manipulations. The only reason I was not a heartless killer was because of him, Doc, and Fen.

“Warn Fen.” She knew how to get to Doc’s. I just hoped she would not get there too late.

She hesitated. “You still need to kill the enemy. I understand she is important to you, but it can only end in death. For all of us.”

“You do not know her.”

She shook her head, her false wrinkles bunching around her pursed lips. “I do not have to. She is matriarch to a tribe who kills more werewolves in a month than we lose in wars. They must be put down.”

“Beatrice, the Command will ensure that outcome, even if I do not wish it. But should something go wrong—”

“Our pack mates need to be protected, even from their Alpha.”

“Exactly. Please.”

She nodded. “They will be warned.”

“That is all I ask. Thank you.”

The old man turned and left.

CHAPTER 36

A Difference of Opinion

ALIA

A large waterfall broke from a hole in the cliff edge. Massive trees grew from all along the edges of the cliff, some growing at a near ninety-degree angle to point their dancing leaves to the blue sky and downy clouds high above.

Ran dove through those clouds. A dew-like feel alighted on my face, as if I had stood too close to a waterfall. I had expected clouds to feel different than fog, but it was much the same. A tiny, blue-haired fairy waved as we flew past, a bright grin on her tiny face. I did a double take, but we were already past her.

Fairies *lived* in clouds?

A streak of light darted within the cloud we just departed. Was that where lightning came from?

Ran evened out of her gradual dive and flapped her wings to slow us, gently alighting on the rocky cliff face just above the massive waterfall. The roar of the water was much softer than I expected, knowing how loud it was from the pools below that my family had often visited when I was younger.

Ran set me on my feet and I stumbled, nearly pitching over the edge. Ran was unconcerned and merely dipped her head over the side to get a drink from the falls.

I plopped down hard on my butt and wiped dew and sweat from my forehead.

You need to relax.

"And you need to stop kidnapping people."

I learned from the best, she replied with a saucy shake of her head.

My lips grew into a grin without my permission. She was right.

She lithely circled me until she was right at my back. She laid down, folding her wings back at her sides. Her head curled around until it was right beside me where she could look out at the land. She released a large sigh that sent a few pebbles over the edge along with a puff of dust.

Of course I'm right.

I leaned in the hollow where her neck met her head. Her ears flicked as flies landed on them. Both were tapered like a horse's, but much larger.

She had two pearlescent horns which curled from her forehead. I reached up and traced one, feeling the smooth surface. There was some sort of soft, velvety lining around the outside that also gave off a glow.

I ran my fingers back down over her forehead and eye ridges, then I scratched under her ear just like I used to when she was a unicorn. The scales were soft and pliable, and I could even lift them up by rows to scratch beneath them. She leaned into my hand, one of her back legs kicking. I chuckled, rubbing the scales back into place and settling back down beside her.

I had never seen the topside of this waterfall. We always went to the large pool at the bottom to swim and watch for the dragon—

My entire body jolted in realization. I turned to her to find her one gigantic eye peeking at me, open just a slit.

Don't ask, she said with a tiny breath before closing her eye again.

I grinned, leaning back against her and looking out at the rolling hills, life-teeming forests, and bustling cities far into the distance. It was as if life couldn't touch us here. The problems faded away as I basked in Ran's warmth and companionship. My eyes slowly closed, and I didn't even realize I was tired until blackness took me away to happy dreams and bright waterfalls.

Ran alighted before the Matriarch's Tent as the sun faded into the horizon and the full moon rose. It was huge, a large, silver presence in the sky before even the brightest stars peeked out. It would be even larger tomorrow, on the night of the Blood Moon.

I leaned my forehead against Ran's. "Thanks, beaut," I said.

She breathed in and out with me for a moment. Then she stepped back, knocked me on my butt with a gentle shove of her huge snout, and leapt into the sky. I covered my eyes to keep the dirt from blinding me.

I stood and spat grit that had gotten into my mouth through my smile. Wow. My cheeks were hurting a bit from smiling. I really needed that.

When I turned, I met Enforcer Markus' eyes.

The smile left my face. "What happened?"

"Someone broke into the Tent. Riled up a few of the creatures. Stole the mage stones the doctor brought with him. Left this." Enforcer Markus handed me a slip of vellum.

Your people are hurting, but you put beasts before us. You will burn on Sixth for what you have done. And I will laugh.

Verand.

My frown deepened as I carefully held the note.

I walked through the tent flap and into chaos. A few werewolves had cornered the sphinx, who was spitting and hissing at the werewolves while clinging to her last remaining baby.

Further in was a dryad who had climbed halfway up the wall and was growing leaves from his normally pale, humanlike skin. The hydra was knocking down posts and the thin walls, pushing past werewolves as if they weren't there.

Needs hit me in a tidal wave, and I sunk to a knee. Markus set his hand on my shoulder, the other on his bow in warning. A large white-and-tan werewolf came to a stop before us. He had a brown

ring around one of his eyes like a monocle. He bowed his head, then turned, huffing a low bark.

Five werewolves in both human and wolf form surrounded me and Markus on all sides as the other werewolves worked to protect the inhabitants from the raging creatures.

They needed a leader. The werewolves were doing well but…

Growls came from the werewolves at my back. I glanced back to see Brandt with six Reds being held back by the snarling werewolves.

My chest inflated as Ran took some of the strain of the *needs*.

I stood, Markus right beside me in case I faltered. I gave him a curt nod.

"Let them through," I said with a clear voice.

Brandt and the six stopped before me with a salute.

"Brandt, take the Reds. The dryad clinging to the ceiling will come down for water. Get it beneath him before he explodes into a tree."

Two of the Reds exchanged wide glances. "That can happen?" one asked.

"Yep. Get him down. The sphinx needs space; get everyone back and let her be. She will harm no one who is not a danger to her." Doc nudged my arm with his cold nose. "You take the sphinx?" I asked. He nodded.

"What about the hydra, ma'am?"

I winced as said hydra stepped on a werewolf's tail, sending the werewolf into a yowl of pain.

"That one's mine."

Ran?

Here. Just get her to me.

I ran forward and rolled in front of the hydra, the snap of teeth missing my hood by a hairsbreadth. I turned, blowing a dart at the head. It hit the soft nose, and the head reared back, blinking quickly.

The head lolled to the side, shaking its head. Then the body stumbled. She nearly slammed against Enforcer Markus, who grabbed a werewolf and shoved him out of the way.

“Hey, pretty girl. You’re safe with me, ok? Come on now.” The middle head snapped its teeth at me and I took off. “Clear the path!” I shouted, and my Reds darted in front of me, getting injured creatures, nurses, healers, and volunteers out of the way.

The pound of enormous feet shook the ground behind me, closing in. Ran sliced a thin slit into the side of the tent and I shoved through.

Enforcer Markus somehow made it outside before me and grabbed my arm. He shielded me to the side as the hydra broke through the wall beside us with a guttural howl of fury.

Ran literally headbutted the hydra, pushing her over. The two heads that were still awake mewled in distress as it flipped all the way over, her legs beating at air like a stuck upside-down turtle.

Markus eased me back, holding me by the shoulders. “Are you alright, madame?” he asked, his eyes searching my face and body.

I blinked at him. “Erm… I’m fine?”

He frowned at the uncertainty in my voice. “Are you harmed?”

I shook my head, trying to think straight and actually answer his question. “I’ve never had anyone ask me that after battle,” I rambled, then slapped a hand over my lips.

A tiny smile quirked his lips. “The werewolf hasn’t asked that?”

I snorted. “Maybe. But mostly he just sniffs for any wounds and immediately panics until it’s taken care of.” I paused. “Which isn’t near as weird as it sounds.”

He raised a brow. “If you say so, madame. I am pleased you are well.”

“Me too. Are you ok?” I asked.

He cracked a tiny smile that showed teeth, which always looked a bit odd on his stern features. “I am well. Thank you for your concern. What should we do about that?” He gestured with his head to the hydra.

I winced. “We need to calm her down—”

Ran eased up beside the hydra and bumped the yowling heads with hers. The hydra stopped flailing and released a rumbling purr in return.

I slumped my shoulders, smiling slightly as Ran eased the hydra over to her belly. The hydra immediately darted under Ran like a terrified chick who'd lost her mother. Which was exactly what the hydra was: an enormous creature who was just a scared baby.

Ran covered the hydra with her wings and hid her from sight.

I leaned against the tent, but immediately straightened as I saw we had company in the form of a bunch of townsfolk. They were watching, disapproval clear in their eyes. There had to be fifty gathered. They were gesturing wildly to Ran, pointing at the tent, and scowling at me.

"Get these creatures out of here before they cost us more lives!"

"Innocent humans will die if you keep these things around."

"Bring back the Reds as they should be!"

I stared at the crowd. They were shouting and getting closer. Ran's chest glowed red and she lowered her head with a low, chittering growl, her entire being radiating a deadly threat and heat pulsing out from her chest. They backed up. Most were not Reds but civilians who wouldn't know how to take on a horned rabbit, much less a full-grown dragon.

They slowly dispersed.

But not before I felt the slow tear of my people's minds away from me like some sort of dreaded disease spreading through every individual. I was slowly losing their trust, and I didn't know how to stop it.

I wished Grandmother and those with her would attack me to my face. Instead, they were destabilizing everything I'd worked for, turning the people against me step-by-step. And I didn't know how to combat things that were ingrained in this tribe.

I'd seen the other side of the creatures we were helping. The gentle and loving sides. How they cared and loved and hurt just like we did.

But my people didn't understand them, and so they feared them.

So help them understand, Ran whispered.

It was the first night of the full moon. On the last night of the Blood Moon in a few days, my people would gather to celebrate

another moon's end. They would dance around bonfires just outside the Matriarch's Palace.

Help them understand.

How—

Wait.

My grin slowly grew.

I'd have to wait a few days, but I'd give my people a show they wouldn't forget.

CHAPTER 37

What Was

ALIA

"What did you do?" I hissed, striding up to Grandmother's throne.

She sat with thread and a Red hood in her hands, slowly darning a hole in her cloak.

She looked up, her eyes piercing mine. "What do you suppose I've *done* now, Granddaughter?" she asked.

I crossed my arms and struggled against the urge to put a blade to her throat. "You helped them escape and then they attacked my friends."

"Who, Aurelia? You must be more specific."

"Verand and Graham," I said through gritted teeth.

Her eyes went back to the darning of her cloak. "Oh? How interesting."

"Tell me why."

"You were always too straightforward, dear. You must learn the art of subtlety. When conducting an investigation, you do not go to the most likely person and demand they tell you what they have done. It is unseemly. Instead, you find out where the person has been and if any evidence may be in play, and then you convince them you know exactly what they did—"

"I do know—"

"But you have not the faintest idea why, now do you?"

I opened my mouth, then shut it. "I know you want the throne back." I gave a pointed glance to the wooden throne on which she sat.

She chuckled, but something in her eye told me she was disappointed. "I trained you better, Aurelia. Think. You were smart, but you always held back because of your blasted altruism. Stop thinking the best of everyone and actually imagine there are people in this world who are evil for the mere rush it gives them for getting something over on the other. Pain for pain, if you will."

"Tell me where they are."

"I do not think I will. You will not harm your dear old grandmother, now will you?" She glanced up, her lips in a thin line. Was she hiding a smile? "No, I think not. Leverage, my dear. Leverage is what you need when interrogating. Not everything can be done through mere threats and stabbing."

Red flushed my face. I turned and strode from the hall to the sound of her deep chuckle at my back.

"Mom? What's wrong?" I stood from petting the little sphinx baby.

Mom stared at me for a moment. It was the wee morning hours of the first night of the Blood Moon. "The… the children… when we woke… They're gone. And no one is helping us get 'em back."

I ground my teeth.

Mom wrung her hands. "We tried to handle it… tried to get everything together on our own… but we couldn't. Elder Timone wouldn't—"

I set a hand on her shoulder and gave her a gentle smile. "Mom, it's ok, alright? We'll get them back. Was it Rey?"

Mom nodded and then shook her head. "We don't know for sure."

But it was likely.

I turned to Brandt. "Go find Elder Timone and send him here."

Brandt saluted and ran off.

"Please go find my nieces and don't leave their sides. Check Rey's home first," I told Enforcer Markus.

Markus hesitated. "You will be alone—"

"I can care for myself, Enforcer. Those kids can't. Please," I said, my heart aching in my chest. After finding out what Rey had done to my sister, he couldn't be trusted. I needed them safe.

And I only hoped that Rey was truly the one who had taken them. If not, I didn't know what I'd do.

Markus had furrows in his stormy brows, but he bowed and ran to do as I bid.

"Mom, go be with Anna, alright? I'll be there as soon as I can."

Mom gave me a quick hug and darted off. I took a seat in a tent corner, leaning my head on my hands.

Fen, Doc's son, walked out from helping with a patient. We ran a skeleton crew at night, and he was in charge when Doc was asleep. Most of the creatures had tapered off in the last few days with less and less *needs* coming in.

I straightened, but he waved at me to remain where I was as he walked over.

"What can I help you with, Miss Alia?"

I stared at him. I had been avoiding him for a long while—mostly because of guilt. It was in my mind to kill him that day, to take out Hood until I found out Hood was Shen. And my mind still asked: would I have killed Fen if I had found him and not Shen that day?

I didn't know. And that scared me.

"I almost killed you," I said.

He got down on a knee before where I sat and studied my face. "I know." His blue eyes were wracked with turmoil.

I shook my head. "No, you don't know. If I hadn't found Shen that night—"

"Luna, I *know*."

My eyes darted to his. "But you came here anyway? To the place where we tortured you for years?" I whispered, my throat tightening at the pain we'd caused him.

A tiny smile tipped his lips. “You brought me food and water. You tended my wounds—”

“After I had made them—”

“You were a child. So was I. We made mistakes. If I had escaped the day after you took me, you would be dead. But life isn’t about what was and what didn’t occur, now is it?”

I shook my head. “Why didn’t you tell me you weren’t Hood?” I whispered.

“I wouldn’t throw Shen under the dragon, Miss Alia. If it took you believing I was Hood for him to find happiness after the torment his own mother subjected him to, then so be it.”

I set a hand on his cheek. He closed his eyes and leaned into my palm. “You deserve happiness after the torment you’ve been through, too, Fen.”

His head fell to his chest and he took a deep breath. I let my hand drop. When he looked back up, a smile was on his face. The one I suspected he wore as a mask. “What can I do to help ease your burden, Miss Alia?”

As I studied him, I realized Shen had so many people who loved him—likely more than Shen himself knew. That made me smile. I just hoped Fen could find his soulmate and his happiness.

I sighed, rubbing my forehead where a headache grew. “Can you make sure my mom makes it safely home? She sometimes passes out from stress.”

He smiled. It was gentle and more real than any of his flirty ones he sent to nearly every female alive. “It would be my honor, Miss Alia.”

“Thanks.”

He bowed and made his way out.

I leaned my head on my hands. My heart was beating out of my chest and my skin was cold and clammy. What would I do if it wasn’t Rey who had taken them? I had so many enemies—

“Hello, Mistress Alia,” Elder Timone said, stepping from the shadows of the tent. “You called for me?”

I glanced up at him, straightening. “Yes, Elder. I have a question. What do the laws say of a man who verbally abuses his wife?”

Elder Timone rubbed his forefinger and thumb down his beard. "Have there been any actual bruises? And is this about your sister? You know, your mother brought concerns to me long ago, but we went to interview them both and there was nothing to be proven. If anything, it was your sister who was running your brother-by-binding." he said with a small, placating smile.

I grew increasingly agitated. My hands kneaded at my blades, even while I kept my face blank. "You interviewed them both? Did you not get my sister alone? Did you not ask her what was happening? Gain her trust before you stuck them both together to ask if there had been abuse?"

Elder Timone's smile dropped. He wouldn't meet my eyes. I leaned back in my chair, staring at him. I couldn't believe it.

"If she were in danger, she should have come out about it. She should have left. That was her freedom, you know."

I leaned forward, biting my tongue before I spewed a mouthful of curses. "And what if he had something over her? Something which kept her from leaving? Whether it be the children, a secret, a threat? What then? All you did was ask them both if there was abuse. They said no, and you left?"

Elder Timone shook his head. "It was not so simple, Matriarch. We asked questions. They were happy with each other. There was no need to embarrass anyone further."

"You mean embarrass Rey. Because my sister needed you, and you failed her. Leave," I hissed.

His jaw ticked and his eyes sparked with a hint of anger, but he bowed and walked out.

My shoulders hunched. I rubbed my eyes as a headache built behind them.

How *could* he?

This—from Anna's sickness to the kidnapped children—could've been prevented if those in power were a bit more competent.

A *need* crashed over me. It was sharp with longing for freedom. I knew that need well.

I glanced up with a hint of a smile. "Shen," I whispered, my heart leaping with happiness. I spotted him hiding in the shadows a mere

ten feet from me.

The smile fell from my face as I met his eyes.

"Run," he whispered with a guttural groan.

CHAPTER 38

A Battle of Wills

ALIA & SHEN

Alia

"Shen, what's wrong?" I asked, standing and taking a step toward him.

Then I saw the blade. His knife was bare, glittering in the moonlight and shaking.

The hair on the back of my neck stood on end at a massive growl from Shen.

"What—"

"Go, Red. NOW!" he barked before doubling over.

Did he really think I'd start listening to him now? I walked over to him, just as fur sprouted along his nose and cheeks and his fangs poked from his upper lips. His *need* screamed at me. It stabbed into my breast, cut into my chest, and tore my heart out.

It wasn't freedom that called to me then. It was his wolven side. I heard something whisper in my mind, something sharp yet gentle, much like the man before me.

His wolf screamed for his mate. My heart clenched. He'd found her. He'd found his mate. I knew she'd come. Of course we could never be. It had only been a fantasy, but it'd been fun while it lasted. Now it was my turn to be there for him as he'd been there for me.

"Who is your mate, Shen?" I asked, gently touching the velveteen fur on his half-shifted, sweat-streaked face.

He looked up. There was such fear in his eyes. It shone with the desperation of a man about to jump from a cliff. I had never seen him so fearful, not even when he tried to trade his life for mine.

"Who's your mate?" I demanded, putting fire into my voice even as he flinched away from my touch.

"You," he whispered, his eyes stark with pain as a single, crystal tear fell from his eye.

My entire soul reverberated with that one word. All of me went into a numb-filled shock before releasing into a gentle warmth. Terror filled me. It was possible for us to be… together? Could we possibly be soulmates?

He clenched his fists, and I brought my gaze back up to his face. It was tight with fear and worry. Did he fear I'd reject him after all we'd been through?

I nearly snorted a laugh. This was Shen. Of course he thought that. So it was time I reassured him, despite my dread.

I set my hand on his cheek, smiling into the fear-filled eyes of the man I loved. He reached out, his hand gripping my throat as his fingers spasmed. The war raged in his eyes, battling against what I could only guess to be his Alpha's Command.

"You won't harm me," I whispered to the boy fighting for freedom and the man who'd almost given up hope.

I knew something he didn't. The only chains one had were the chains they allowed. There was always a way out, but the brain likes to play tricks to make one think they were stuck. The unknown was so much more terrifying than the monsters one knew.

It was time for my werewolf to break his chains. He was too strong for them to hold. They'd been there for so long he'd not tested them since he was a child. I didn't know how I knew. Perhaps it was my Gift, perhaps it was something more, but I knew this man, this werewolf before me would be free. Even if it took my death.

"You won't harm me, my love," I whispered, leaning forward and kissing his forehead even as one of his fingers dug into my neck hard enough to bruise. "And if you do, then it will finally grant you

your freedom. It is easy to die for someone, Wolfie. It's so much harder to live for them." I rested my forehead against his, letting his breath wash over my lips and mingle with my own. "Live for me."

He moaned a gut-aching sound and then he screamed. It was a feral, agonizing sound halfway between a man's hoarse roar and a wolf's howl.

He wrenched his fingers from my neck, digging them into his hair. I pulled him into my chest, rocking him, taking up space beside him. It was all I could do. This was his battle to fight, and I could only be there to support him.

Shen

Her tears soaked into my hair. Such a simple thing, smelling of salt and something sweet, but those scents grounded me. She was here. The one my heart cried for. The one my wolf was destined to love. It was more than that. She was my rock and my soul. My gentle flower and shimmering star.

She was both gentle and fierce; the strongest of them all, yet the one who calmed a babe with a simple hug. She knew what others needed because of her Gift, and it was testament to her character that she never even thought of using their needs against them.

In my world, such a Gift would be coveted for the havoc and control it offered. She could manipulate even the strongest souls into giving her whatever the bane she wanted. Because who would not give their souls to have someone meet the needs even they could not see? Or she could make a life a miserable existence by denying their every need.

Instead, she met all creatures where they were. From the smallest lizard to the dragon queen, she met them in their needs and gave of herself until their needs were met.

I had vowed to look after this selfless creature. But now I was sent to kill her.

The Command wrapped around the part of my soul bound to my pack. That essence of myself was fraying, being strangled beneath the Alpha's weight. I only knew one way through this—and it would cost me my wolf.

"You are never stuck. And there is always another path. You must find it," my heart, my soul, and my very breath whispered into my ear. If not for her sitting here before me, I would cut my throat and be done with this miserable existence.

No, you won't. We'll make it through this, my wolf bit out, his whine echoing in my voice. I hoped Red had not hear the pitiful sound, but her arms tightened around me in confirmation that she had.

If only she had run. I would have stopped this. I would have turned my wolf on another being, wrapping myself in the soothing pain of another until I could end it all.

And yet, her scent wrapped around me with all the essence of sunshine warming a cold soul, a gentle ray of life and freedom that sought to provide growth and sustenance.

The Command forced my hand close to her ribs, where I knew the knife I held was angled to pierce her heart. I fought it, putting my other hand on my wrist to keep the blade locked in place, but it did not work. The blade inched closer and pierced through the tunic she wore. Red stained the white fabric as her skin slowly gave beneath it. Her sharp intake of breath was the only pain she allowed to show. But she did not move.

A tear dropped from my eye, tickling the hair sprouting on my face as it fell from my nose. I hurt her.

My chest would not inflate. The knowledge of my mate perishing under my hand caused an anvil to press against my ribs.

Muscle and sinew parted like warm butter; my sharp blade had been designed for this specific task. Never for her, though.

"I trust you," Alia whispered, her voice low and filled with warmth.

And in those three words, I heard another three words.

A guttural roar ripped from my lips. *Help me,* I cried out to Lycus.

He howled, his voice rippling with fury and love as he sent his life force into me. Dangerous, but effective. Dangerous because, should I lose this battle, we will be fused and become rogue. But effective because with our combined strength, we shoved against the Command, giving us the hint of willpower needed to save my mate's life.

The blade eased from her ribs. It shook in my hands at the strain of the war in my soul.

Fenbutt slid into the tent, his nose twitching. He came over to me and bowed, his eyes alight with humor and something ageless I could not name.

Alpha, said his voice in my mind.

Luna, said his voice to my mate.

She jerked as if stung.

Were it any other situation, I would have laughed. She stays still when being stabbed but jumps at a voice in her mind?

Another being walked through the tent door. She was as mighty as a destrier and as stunning as the sunrise. It was a timeless beauty, a wonder which could never be contained in any form upon this planet. And yet, here she was.

The dragon bowed her head and bent a knee, her graceful neck curving in a way I had never seen such a creature submit. It was wrong; and yet, it was right. My little luna had proven herself worthy of a dragon's love and a werewolf's loyalty.

A werewolf howled from outside the tent. Fen, Doc, his mate Madame Vika, Daisy, and other young and elderly werewolves I knew from my castoff pack entered the tent. They each bowed their heads to us.

"*Alpha. Luna,"* they said. Despite the pain, it warmed a frozen portion of my soul how they accepted Alia as my mate. Even though she was human, she was my Luna and Queen.

"We cannot overcome Command, but we can choose to follow the Alpha and Luna of our hearts," Fen said, staring into my eyes with stark honesty as those behind him bowed to us. "Together, brother, we win or we die."

My eyes were wide with shock. What were they doing? They *would* die if they tied their life forces to me and I was unable to break the Command.

"Ye took us in when we had nowhere else to go. We may be weak of bodies, but our spirits are strong. We stand with ye, sir," said Daisy, the daughter of my old nursemaid who was cast out from the pack after years of service. Tears were in her eyes. "Don't let my mama's sacrifice be in vain." Her eyes flashed with her wolf.

Should you fail to procure the heart of mine enemy, do not return.

The ultimate words of the Command wrestled control of my hands before my mind had time to fight. The blade sunk between my ribs—

I was thrown back, the blade wrestled from my side by two dainty hands which should never have been strong enough to take me. Alia pressed her thumbs against the underside of my wrist with stinging effectiveness and my hand spasmed open. She grabbed the blade and took it from my ribs in one smooth motion.

"Fight it, my love," she said, her voice a low, fevered growl as her eyes glowed with a mixture of tears and intensity. "Fight it for all of us. For *your* pack."

I put my head in my hands and growled. It echoed from my chest, scorched the inside of my soul, and erupted from my lips in a promise. I was Alpha to a pack now. And that meant my allegiance to my previous pack was no longer required.

Did you… I did not even know how to ask if Lycus had called them.

It wasn't me, he answered, pride in his voice.

Ahhh. But how did Alia… I could contemplate this later. For now, Alia had found me a loophole. It was time to become Alpha.

I accepted the links from the other werewolves. From Ran, Fenbutt, Fen, and the others who were here offering their strength to cut the bond so they could follow a new Alpha.

A shiver rose from the depths of my mind. Lycus howled in my brain as the combined might of a dragon, a pup, and many werewolves struck the Command at the source. It bent under the

pressure and then it snapped, rebounding and coming for my soul to sever me from Lycus. To make me go rogue.

The werewolves were there. My *pack* was there. Shielding me, they whimpered in agony as the pain of the severance spread across all those in my pack. Tears welled in my eyes as those who were cast from my mother's pack took the pain meant for me. I bowed my head, humbled beyond measure by their sacrifices.

A wave of pressure caused my sight to go black and I wavered before it eased and then disappeared.

And it was in that moment, I realized—Lycus was with me. The Command had snapped. I was free.

CHAPTER 39

Freedom

ALIA

Shen's eyes met mine. I saw the moment he knew and the moment he decided.

His eyes pooled with emotion and a tear slid down his cheek as he watched his pack members writhe in torment as they all accepted his burden. I wished in that moment that I had it in me to do the same, to take some of his pain, but I couldn't. I'd brought them here. It had to be enough.

A surge of power went through the tent and knocked me back. When I scrambled to my feet, Shen was laughing. *Laughing*, the dolt. It was choked and it was hoarse, but he was *alive*.

"I am free," he whispered. He turned to the werewolves. He slowly rose to his knees and bowed his head to them. "Thank you."

"None of that. Ye saved us first, sir. We're just here to return the favor," Daisy said, lifting Shen's chin and gently patting his cheek with a soft smile on her tanned, slightly wrinkled face. Tears trailed from her eyes and dropped from her chin.

Shen bowed his head as if struggling to reign in his emotions. He slowly stood and stared at those who had come to support him. They bared their necks to him, each and every one smiling with gratitude to the one who had earned their loyalty.

This was my Shen. A compassionate leader. A worthy Alpha. A *kind* man.

He turned to me. There was a warmth so deep in his eyes it made them sparkle. “Thank you,” he said, reaching out a hand.

But then, a hint of moonlight touched his boot. He winced and a wry smile crossed his face. “We will talk later,” he said, crouching over as the moon brought forth his wolven side. The rest of the werewolves in human form did the same.

I winced as his bones cracked, as fur sprouted along his skin, and as his nose elongated. A split second later, he was there. His wolf was the size of a bear, his head a little higher than my eye level. If he stood on his back legs, he’d likely be seven to ten feet tall.

His silken fur was the black of rich earth with hints of amber. His eyes were nearly pure gold and glistened in the moonlight. When they met mine, his tail slowly slapped against his sides as his tongue lolled from the corner of his mouth.

And then I understood why he never let me see his wolven form. His tail was tipped in white and there was a heart-shaped white spot on his hip—Hood’s calling card.

I walked over to him. My heart pounded an erratic beat within my chest, but fear was not why. He was intimidating, yes. He was magnificent beyond comparison, also yes. But the man I knew was still the werewolf; they were one. I rested my hand on his cheek, his breath washing over me, nearly causing me to gag. His breath was worse than Fenbutt’s. Then he sighed.

“You’re beautiful,” I whispered, kissing his nose. It twitched and his hind end wiggled in happiness. He licked my nose.

His eyes was asking me for something, but I couldn’t tell what.

I blinked at him and my eyebrows furrowing with confusion. He laid down before me and gestured to his back with his nose. I blinked and blinked again, my nose wrinkling, unsure he meant what I thought he meant.

Just get on already! Ran groused, pushing me forward with her snout on my behind, smoke curling around her nostrils.

I slowly eased my leg over his broad back and settled just behind his shoulder. I pulled my hood up and snapped my cowl into place. Shen patiently waited until I gently patted his shoulder, then he rose. He lifted his head and howled. It was long and haunting and ended

in a deep growl. The werewolves in the tent lifted their muzzles. A werewolf responded in the distance. Another howled from outside the tent and others from miles away. That was not merely a howl. It was a war cry from those who weren't close enough to make it, but who had chosen their Alpha.

Pride swelled in my chest. Shen was a beautiful, caring soul in a dangerous package.

He glanced back and whined, his nose twitching at the blood tricking from the wound in my side. His eyes were a mixture of self-loathing and hatred. I had never seen such emotion in an animal before.

I pulled back my cloak to look at it. The wound wasn't deep and the bleeding had mostly stopped. I put a yarrow and sap mixture on it, which would seal it until my body healed naturally.

I booped his nose with my finger, making his nose twitch as I grinned. "It's fine, Wolfie. A mere scratch."

He snorted in what sounded like disagreement. His eyes met mine as if trying to convey something. Then he turned forward and walked into the dawning of a new day.

I glanced back to see Fen and the rest following us. I realized now how I had mistaken Fen for Hood. He had the white-tipped tail and a spot of white on his flank, but it wasn't heart-shaped like on Shen's werewolf. It was almost a half-moon shape.

I chuckled at myself for having missed such a minute detail. I would've never forgiven myself if I had killed Fen. It would have eventually killed my soul. I would be forever grateful that Shen was Hood for that one saving grace.

Shen kept his first steps gentle, but I had become good at riding due to a crazy unicorn-dragon with a penchant for trying to throw me in ice-cold rivers. Ran's wingtip smacked me on the back of the head as she tottered out the door ahead of us. I snarled low in my throat and then paused when the sound nearly scared me off Shen's back. What the heck was that?

You've been hanging around a werewolf too much, that's what, Ran said, amusement coating her voice.

I ignored her. Shen glanced back at me, his eyes searching me from head to toe. I leaned forward and rubbed his ears. "Let's go," I said, smiling. "I need to pay a visit to a little friend and rescue my nieces."

He cocked his head, interest in his eyes. His freedom inspired me. I was Matriarch of the Reds but had been tiptoeing around my sister's husband for weeks, trying to keep him away from Anna and the kids, afraid he would use what he knew against us. It was time that stopped. "Take me to the shop that smells of candles and lye."

He gave a light yip and increased his pace, the werewolves yipping behind us as they joined in a run with us as the spearhead.

I wrapped my hands in Shen's thick fur and held on with my legs. His gait was much different than that of a unicorn. It was rolling and nearly smooth, but with a tiny quirk. When he'd speed up, there was a slight lag before the rest of his body caught up. But it was nothing like what Ran put me through, so it was quite easy to sit. We passed my villagers, and they stopped to stare.

"What… is that…"

"That's Mistress Red!"

"Is that Hood?" another voice screamed, running away in terror.

Others stood still, their eyes popping from their sockets in pure shock.

"Mistress Red is riding Hood!"

"It's a Red riding Hood!"

"A *little* Red riding Hood!" another said, which I swore was Brandt's voice.

"Hey!" I shouted, but they were already well behind me. I was offended. Shen was huge in his wolven form, sure, but heck. I wasn't *that* small.

People quickly scrambled out of our way, one even tripping over a kid they didn't see behind them. I glanced behind me and both were getting up, staring after us with open mouths.

I smiled, letting my arms relax. This was… nice. It was freeing, exhilarating.

We stopped in front of Rey's father's shop. Rey walked out, wiping his hands on his apron, his father right behind him to see

what the commotion was. They both froze.

I got down from Shen, clenching my teeth. I'd had to make nice to this man for too long. It was time it ended.

I walked up to him. "Curo, is your sister alright?" Rey asked, his voice concerned and his brows furrowing.

I said nothing.

He shifted his feet, glancing at those surrounding us, people who were too curious for their own good and had followed the werewolves instead of running. The werewolves spread out behind me, careful not to get too close to the humans who eyed them with distrust. "Please, is everyone alright? This is a frightening way to show up—"

"Where are Jess and Fina?"

His eyes darkened. "My children? Did you lose them?" he asked. For a moment, my heart dropped. But then two little voices came from overhead.

"*Leelee*! We're up here!" a sweet, sweet voice said. Enforcer Markus pushed open a window.

"They were locked up here, madame," he said. He paused, then added, "Fina is not speaking, but Jess has expressed her father was not kind to the children." A threat underlined every word. Rey paled.

"No, he weren't!" Jess said, her voice wavering.

"Please get them out and to my family, Enforcer Markus. Thank you for finding and protecting them," I said.

There were people gathering around, watching with wide eyes and bated breath.

"This is not like you, Alia. Please, as my sister, know I meant nothing wrong. I just wished to see my children. You all have been keeping them so much and have been so busy, you have turned me away the last few times I came to see them—"

He had to stop speaking when his nose crunched beneath my fist. He squealed like a girl, his voice ringing with pain. "Whash you dosh—"

"That is for my sister. This is for my family." I punched him again, driving him to his knees. I was always scared of this man. Scared that he would finish my sister off. Scared that he would use his

connections to oust my family secret that my sister had so painstakingly hidden, but it was time.

I was done being a pushover. I was done letting boys run over me and my family. I knew what a real man was like, and it was so much more than this quavering heap before me. True men protected you from others, yes. But most of all, they protected you from themselves. Shen listens, respects me, and works hard to understand what I need. This boy before me was an insecure brat trying—and failing—to be seen as a man.

Sadly, true men were few and far between. There were many who were roped into thinking men like *this* bag of bones was what a man was supposed to be, and they go their entire lives not realizing they deserved better.

I glanced back at Shen, who was sitting like a dog, Fenbutt at his feet. Ran and the other werewolves were nowhere to be found. A couple of orphans were slowly inching up to him. His imperial bearing was enough to drive most of the adults off, but kids were another breed entirely. They were closing in on his tail, watching as it twitched on the ground. Their eyes were wide with wonder and curiosity, their bare feet peeking out from their grimy trousers.

One child reached out, almost touching the tail when it twitched away from her hand. She tried again and it wagged, brushing against her nose before falling to the other side. She pounced, straddling his tail between her legs and sitting on it with a wide, gap-toothed smile. She glanced up and paled, seeing Shen had turned his head in an act of contortion and was staring at her from inches away.

To her credit, she didn't move. Whether that was in fear or wonder, I'd never know. She met his eyes, her mouth wide and her green eyes dancing from beneath mud-streaked hair.

Shen sneezed. The girl jumped… and then she giggled. Shen nuzzled her with his nose. She raised her hands and caught his muzzle, smiling so bright her eyes nearly disappeared from her grin as she stared up at him. His entire being softened. How a bear-sized werewolf could suddenly become a puppy in the hands of a child a tenth of his weight, I would never know. She felt around his face

and nearly poked his eye before one of the other kids got there. Shen rolled over, gently playing with the kiddos, Fenbutt prancing around and mock-growling as he joined the fun.

Could my heart have melted anymore? Doubt it.

He's gonna be a lovely father.

Oh heck no my brain did not just go—

There? Oh girl, you're as smitten as a dragon smelling embers for the first time, Ran teased.

"You've brought a cold-blooded murderer into the village, ousted our very leader with your witchery, and now you come for your very brother?"

The words of Rey's father, Bill, prompted me to spin around, only to see him holding a crossbow pointed at Shen and the kids. A few others were on top of buildings, their crossbows glistening with silver arrows. Shen wasn't concerned, even turning to give me a wink, but he moved so the kids were beneath him, away from the arrows even as they continued to play. I sighed, resisting the urge to rub my eyes. Couldn't he take death threats a bit more seriously? And could he *stop* putting himself in the way of blasted arrows?

"Are you this much of an idiot, Billy?" I said, stepping between him and Shen. "They were never our enemy. We hurt them first. We began this war. And now you and your little boy-child threaten my family? It ends now. Your child was never my sibling. He is a manipulative abuser who has used my sister all these years, keeping her sick just so he can use her all over again." I raised my eyes to those around me, those with their hands on weapons and those watching in contemplative silence.

I stood on a precipice. How I responded would determine my reign. I could win them or lose them, here and now. No pressure.

I took a deep breath, and I decided. Regardless of whether I won or lost, I would stay true to myself. I would be honest.

"My sister has magic, just as I do. But old Billy boy here didn't want you to know that, did he? No, he must keep her Gift contained, because her Gift allowed him to buy this shop, allowed him to gain riches—all by knowing a person's deepest secrets so he could blackmail others into subservience."

The crowd stepped away from Rey and Bill.

"Is that how you knew Shawn was conceived out of wedlock? You cost me my son because I wouldn't give into your demands!" a woman cried out, her voice verging on murder.

"He cost me my best pigs and slaughtered my best stock!"

"He's made me pay tithe to his family."

That and more was tossed at the two, weapons slowly lowered and the people staring at the them with clenched fists and hard eyes.

"Why did you not say anything?" Elder Timone asked. His face was weathered by time and hard work, but his voice and body were still strong as he came up beside me.

I shrugged. "What would have happened differently?" I asked. "Mom had already come forward, questioning the marriage and his behavior, but you said it was young love. You allowed this abuse, Elder Timone. Because you looked the other way, my sister became sick. Because you wished to hide under a rock and not allow your secrets to come out, you gave into demands that went against all we stood for. But now we have a second chance. We all do. A second chance to do this right, to protect the innocent and those who cannot protect themselves. A chance to right the wrongs of our ancestors. To usher in an age of peace where we wage war on those who would harm the innocent, the weaker but not lesser, and the broken but healing people and creatures of our world, just as our code was meant to be."

"And we stand by you." The voice came out of the crowd. It was of a deep timbre, shivering with pride.

CHAPTER 40

Confrontation

ALIA & SHEN

Alia

The people parted, and there stood my family. Dad stood at the front, his eyes glowing with something I would almost call tears, except I'd never seen him cry. He held little Fina while Mom held Jess; both children had their eyes locked upon their father.

My heart broke. These two would forever adore the man meant to love them unconditionally, but they would someday have to come to understand what he is, and I hoped it didn't break them when they found out.

My sister and brother stood right behind them, Jacob gently holding Anna upright. She gave me a weak but radiant smile. She had already gained some weight; her cheeks weren't so sunken, and her eyes were a little less dim. What this man had done to her would leave scars, but with time, she would heal.

That was the thing about broken things: they could always be mended with a little elbow grease and hard work.

"We're by your side, hon, every step of the way," Mom said, her smile wide and her eyes sparkling with a mixture of rage and love. She wanted to tear Rey to pieces, but she was holding his child and would do nothing of the sort while the kids were around. But when they were not?

Her wrath should terrify the man-boys at my back, but they stepped forward. I felt the grazing of wind, but when I turned, Shen had an arrow in his mouth, holding it by the shaft. He slowly bit it in half, his eyes never leaving the man who was once my sister's husband.

The man-child paled, his face stricken as if he finally understood what danger he was in. He slowly lowered the bow in his hands.

Shen stepped forward, his eyes glowing red as his lips peeled back to reveal fangs the size of a finger and a half. The people took a collective step back as Rey soiled his pants.

I touched Shen's shoulder, feeling the muscles roiling beneath his fur, readying to pounce.

"His children are behind us. Please…," I whispered.

Shen turned his head, his eyes meeting mine. There was murderous rage in the depths so profound I had never seen the like. But he slowly nodded. He turned to Rey and Bill, both of whom were hemmed in by the people they'd manipulated. A slow grin teased my lips. Those people wouldn't let him get away any more than I would. Anna wasn't the only person they'd manipulated and abused.

Shen curled his tail around my waist as he walked by. His steps were slow and languid, belonging to a hunter who knew his superiority. It was a thing of terrifying beauty to watch.

I nearly stepped forward, but I needed to trust him as he'd trusted me and let him handle this.

As he moved, Rey fell on his butt and crab-walked backwards until he hit the front of his dad's store.

Shen pulled his lips back, his eyes never leaving his prey, and a low growl rumbled in his chest.

Rey whimpered, curling into a ball at Shen's feet.

"Daddy!" cried a little voice.

Jess jumped out of Mom's arms and scrambled around me. She got between Rey and Shen, holding out her little arms with tears racing down her cheeks. "Please, don't hurt my daddy," she said. Her tears washed twin white streaks down the dirt on her face.

My heart cried out in pure, screaming pain.

Some people didn't deserve the love of a child.

And the child didn’t deserve the hate of the parent.

Shen immediately dropped to his stomach with his nose to her feet. He licked her bare feet—we can never keep shoes on those toes—and she giggled in surprise. Shen’s posture morphed from killing intent to puppy in that split second. He gently reached up and licked her cheek. She recoiled from him, and his whimper broke what was left of my heart.

Jess wrapped her arms around her quavering father. I glanced back helplessly as a child loved a manipulative bastard who was still her father.

Was there any hope for their relationship? One could never know, but I hoped someday, somehow, things would change and the sweet little one would have her happily ever after. Hopefully, it would be before she was scarred inside from a father who didn’t know love and couldn’t give it to her.

Dad met my gaze, and in the timelessness and wisdom of his eyes, I saw that he understood. Mom had tears down her cheeks so much like her granddaughter that it caused a spasm of pain in my chest.

Shen turned as if he felt the pain of my soul.

Rey looked at Shen. “Don’t,” Rey hissed. “I know you. I know what you’ve done. You killed him—”

“How *dare* you!”

I nearly jumped out of my skin at the shout directly beside me. I was so engrossed and honestly shocked beyond measure that I hadn’t even realized my family had come up beside me. My sister had released a yell so loud I feared my eardrum might have burst.

“You’re a piece of scum. How I didn’t see it until now is beyond me. Are you so very stunted you’d seek a way out regardless if it’s at the cost of another secret *I* told you—”

“If you weren’t a harlot, it never would’ve come to this. If you weren’t too sickly to provide, we never would’ve come to this point. No matter how you make me the bad guy in your mind, never forget how all this started: you were a runt born with magic who wanted to fall in love and live a normal life. You never will, because you aren’t *normal*.”

While he was speaking, Shen stayed still, but my family was moving. So was my town.

It was time to pull myself together and be the leader this place needed.

Shen darted his eyes at me. They were golden, not red.

"Daddy?" the little girl asked. Her voice was soft, nearly numb except for a little quaver.

"It's alright, darling. You want Daddy to be ok, right? All these people want to kill Daddy. Will you help me get out of here?"

As the girl nodded her little head, the blood boiling in my chest burst into my extremities.

Never had I known that one could see red. Never had I been so filled with rage it seemed as if the heart in my chest would combust. Never had I seen a man so broken that he first kidnapped his daughter and then asked her to *help* him escape punishment for it.

"If you want your secrets to remain secret, I suggest you let me and my daughters go," Rey said.

"What about me?" his father asked.

Rey ignored him. "Let us go, and nothing need be said about any of this," he warned. It made me wonder if he knew about Shen and about my grandpa. If that got out, it could be disastrous and might break the peace I'd slowly been growing between my people and those who came into our tribe with needs and magic.

Rey was a despicable soul.

If I had not seen a real man, I would've signed off on the male species once and for all. Heck, I might've become a deranged hermit, never wanting to see a human again. But I had my dad and now I had Shen, a werewolf assassin who had more honor in his pinky finger than many of my Reds.

I would change that as much as I could. And it began with the children.

A child who knew no love and no mercy became Rey. And if Rey had both his children, they would either become him or become the opposite, which would be one who was attracted to a person like Rey to try to plug the hole from an absent father.

I hoped and prayed my family and I could change that and break the curse of Rey from his children. That we could help them see how much they're loved and accepted as the little blessings they are. Imperfect little creatures of pure joy and (mostly) happy chaos.

At a flick of my fingers, Shen growled, and two of the Reds near Rey pounced. Of all the things my Reds weren't, one thing they were, were well-trained assassins.

Rey had no chance as a civilian.

As my family took in the crying little girl and wrapped her in love with her mama, I met Rey's eyes.

"I don't accept blackmail from someone my sister lowered her standards to be with," I hissed.

I don't know what he saw, but his face drained of all color and he went limp in the Red's arms on either side of him.

Shen's arms wrapped around me. I realized I was quavering with a mixture of rage and pain and adrenaline. My throat had stopped functioning and my heart was trying to fly from my chest.

"Take him and his father to the dungeons. Matriarch Alia will return shortly after her family is settled," Shen told my Reds. They saluted him and darted to do his bidding.

Shen took my shoulder and guided me out of town.

"My family," I whispered.

"Your family is fine, Carissimus. They are safe. Your father is watching over them and knows you are with me."

My lips quavered.

"It is just me, Little Red. Let it out."

I glanced up at him. "I don't know if I can," I said. It had been so long. "I think I've forgotten how to—"

"How to cry? Did you see Rey's face when I stalked him?"

I blinked at him. "He crapped his pants." I nearly giggled.

"And his father. I do not know if you saw it, but he went from beet red to lobster red and whiter than your pretty, little dragon."

I did giggle then, even though it wasn't that funny. "That was pretty epic," I said.

Shen grabbed my chin, lifting my eyes to meet his. His were concerned but pinched in a smile. "And your sister. She told him

where to shove it—”

He cut off as I laughed. But the laugh was odd. It changed quickly, catching in my throat.

“There she is,” Shen whispered, kissing my forehead and then pushing my head so it fell against his chest. The soothing rhythm of his heartbeat against my ear. “Come now, Little Red. You are safe to break with me. We will pick up the pieces later. Together.”

I clutched his tunic as if I were drowning and he were the lifeboat.

“It's too much,” I whispered, my breath coming in panicked gasps as my mind threw all the things that could go wrong at me. All I had to lose. All I had done, and it still wasn’t enough. My eyes grew hot, my head pounded, my heart fluttered in my chest.

“Shhh, little one. I have you,” Shen said softly, smoothing my hair back from my forehead and placing a gentle kiss there as sobs rose from my chest and tears cooled the heat behind my eyes.

Shen was there through it all, holding me, purring, and gently soothing my broken spirit.

I fell asleep on his chest.

Shen

I KISSED HER HAIR, gently cradling her. Her breathing had evened out, although she still hiccupped from the force of the tears.

Years of emotion had been pent up inside her little body. I was honored to be the one to hold her through it. I had seen beyond her walls. She had trusted me to watch her break. And that was the single most precious item in this world besides her heart that I would forever hold dear.

She had set me free. And now it was time I did the same for her, even if it took years.

I would support her, uplift her, and be there for her until she could lay down her armor and be just a girl without the strength. Oh, she needed her strength. I respected it and loved it about her. She was a warrior through and through. But beneath the armor, she also needed to be human, to be vulnerable, to be seen as a capable, independent woman who also sometimes needed to just *be*.

To not be seen as a fixer. To not be seen as a healer. To not be seen as matriarch.

To just be… her.

It would take time. She had been meeting needs for so long, it was hard for her to accept her needs being tended to. I had seen the guilt in her eyes when she had left the village. I had taken in the concern in her father's eyes as he had nodded to me and mouthed for me to take care of his little girl. I had watched how hard it was for her to show the brokenness on the outside when she had already shattered inside.

I would help her pick up the pieces. And then I would allow her to be however she wanted to be. Even more so, how she *needed* to be.

I wanted to be the person who knew her needs and met them.

CHAPTER 41

Dragon Rider

ALIA

When I woke, I was still cradled in Shen's arms, but something large was blocking out the sun. I squinted up to see a white wing lined with gently rippling feathers and followed it down to white scales on a long, muscular body.

I noticed each scale shimmered like opal gemstones. Her body was lithe and feminine. She had two wings and four legs, and her long tail was curled up around me and Shen like our own personal wall of protection. I followed her neck up to her face to see her gentle brown eyes staring at me. It was still odd to see them in this form. She was so different, and yet the mischief mixed with love in her eyes was the exact same.

"I'm still gonna miss the unicorn form," I said with a tiny smile.

She huffed out a breath that was her form of a laugh, and smoke curled from her nostrils. *I will not miss the cloven hooves and wingless body, thanks,* she said, moving her front legs and staring down at the individual claws that were quite similar to a person's hand, just much larger and with sharp white tips instead of fingernails. Her foot—paw?—was as large as my head thrice over.

"Why… how…"

I was cursed by a witch to wear a wingless form until I learned the true meaning of love. I was forbidden to speak of it and spent many a long year in the woods until those pricks caught me. And then you came along.

I smiled up at her as she brought her nose before me, smelling of roasted pine needles. I raised a hand and set it on her cheek, kissing her nose just as I had when she was a unicorn. "And then I set you free from those who'd caught you. But you didn't have to bond me then."

She breathed out. *No. But it was the best thing I ever did.*

I smiled and laid my head on her nose. Then I was hoisted upright by two powerful arms. I squeaked like a frog losing air. Shen set me on Ran's back.

"Every dragon-bonded must learn to fly," Shen said, gently patting Ran's neck.

She turned and hissed at him. He patted her nose and she blinked, as if unsure how to take his blasé reaction to her threat. "Fly, Little Red, and don't come back until you have left all your troubles in the sky."

Ran turned to look at me, and I leaned against her warm neck, hooking my feet beneath her wings. Tears leaked from the corners of my eyes as I smelled her. Her scent of freedom and wild abandon mixed with pine. I squeezed my arms around her neck. She felt like chain mail armor but was as soft and malleable as sheepskin leather.

"Let's fly," I said. This time, I wouldn't be dangled beneath her like some prized catch. Excitement and anxiety bubbled in my stomach.

She released a loud bellow, which was a mix between an eagle's screech and a lion's roar. Her muscles bunched beneath me and her wings beat against the air, sending a gust of wind out which sent Shen rolling. Ran laughed in my mind. She leapt. The force nearly sent me tumbling from her back, but I stuck it only because it suspiciously resembled when she used to race through the woods and then come to a screeching halt before a cold body of water.

I held tight with my legs and arms as she rose to the sky with a second cry that sounded more eagle than lion.

You've…

Yes, Two-Legs. I've hoped for this for so very long. From the beginning.

From the minute you insulted me and called me an 'insolent two-legged creature who stinks of rotten venison and refuse'?

Ran snorted, billowing smoke into the skies. *Maybe it was a bit after that,* she admitted.

A laugh bubbled from my lips. Tears fell and washed off her scales, falling far below as I thought of all I could have lost. Gratitude didn't begin to describe the depth of the joy bursting in my chest.

Ran straightened out from our steep climb and her wings leveled as she rode a draft of wind. It was quiet up here in the oddest ways that I hadn't taken the time to admire last time. There was sound—the rushing of wind and the gentle brush of air against feather, but no animals squawking, no werewolves howling, no people talking.

Rise, my rider, and see, Ran whispered in my mind, her voice soft with nostalgia and a passion so deep she wanted to share it with anyone she loved.

I slowly uncoiled my arms from around her neck and sat up. It took another few seconds to convince my eyes to open.

The sun blinded me. I blinked quickly and then I nearly fell off my dragon.

What I saw… what I was experiencing… it was indescribable. It was the first breath of air a babe sucks into parched lungs. It was the first sip of water after a drought. It was the heartbeat of all living things.

There was nothing up here. Yet everything could be seen.

Forests teeming with life, animals bounding within the shimmering boughs and birds rustling from branch to branch. Grasslands weaving as if the wind were taking her gentle fingers and rolling it over the grassy plains. Blue and brown rivers bubbling with white foam streamed over cliffs to land in deep pools far below. Snaking waterways, all leading to the massive ocean. The ocean looked as if someone had set a mirror beneath the sky so vast that it stretched as far as the eye could see.

Then there were the cities. So tiny they looked like the little dollhouses my father built for the children. Tiny people leading horses and carts to and fro. Werewolves frolicking along the streets,

playing capture the stick. Mages within their schools practicing magic behind their walls, growing plants and levitating items. Elves growing their houses right outside the city gates in their own mini city because they preferred being closer to nature.

It was different from up here. It put life into perspective.

All those people, all with their own hopes and dreams and desires. All living their lives as best they knew how.

We weren't so different.

Sometimes it just took a different perspective to see everything in a new light.

I brushed my hand down Ran's glorious, scaled neck. "Thank you, my sister," I whispered.

She turned so one eye was toward me and winked.

WHEN WE LANDED, Shen was waiting with a massive bucket of water for Ran and food for me. It was my mom's shepherd's pie and freshly picked blueberries.

I dove into the pie and stuck a few blueberries in my mouth, relishing the pop of sweet and tangy fruit mixed with the buttery flavor of the pie.

I settled back on my log and grabbed another bite. We hadn't yet *talked.* Not about my grandpa and *that* night. We needed to. "Do you mind a prying question?" I asked, my voice hesitant. We were having a good time. I didn't want to break the peaceful day Shen had given me, but I *needed* to. I wouldn't run from hard things.

He nodded, a hint of a smile gracing his face. He was standing so still I could've mistaken him for a statue. I took a deep breath and quickly said, "I haven't heard of Alpha Command in a long time. The lore around it is spotty at best. Do you mind me asking why your mother had that power over you?"

Shen glanced away, rubbing his thumb on a blade poking from his belt. "There are two ways an Alpha may use Command. A true

Alpha of the royal bloodline may use it, but each time takes energy from their werewolf. How often they may use it depends on their own power."

"And the other way?"

He wouldn't meet my eyes, his gaze set far into the distance. "An Alpha may use it when a shifter has sold their wolf or done something so despicable they would have went rogue except for the Alpha containing the wolf to remain within the human." He gritted his teeth, his jaw nearly cracking from the strain. "Mine was the latter. It was my first target. An innocent man. I killed him before his granddaughter. Lycus was nearly torn from me, but Mother stopped him. He stayed for the sake of the pack, not me. Over the years, I have tried to protect him, to earn back his trust…"

Unconsciously, I leaned away from him. He looked up, pain stark in his eyes. "I am the one who killed your grandfather, Alia. And I was not under Alpha Command when I did so."

My heart froze in my chest. I lost moments, minutes. I didn't know how long. I just knew I suddenly came to being wrapped in Ran's warmth and pine scent, my eyes so dry they ached and my mind replaying the scene from so long ago.

I saw my grandpa's throat ripped out. Over and over again, it played in my mind. I saw the werewolf who did it, a flash of a white heart on his flank so incongruous with the gory scene. His eyes were alight with fear and pain, his mouth painted red. His *need* pounded against me, part of it for freedom, but most for his father. A *need* that I often felt right after a loved one had passed.

I collapsed into Ran's neck, my body too weak to hold me upright. She wrapped me in her wings, touched me to her chest, and let me hear the gentle shush of her massive heart.

"I thought he was under Command," I cried. Why could he not have been under Command? I knew he'd killed my grandpa, but I'd so foolishly believed that he hadn't done it of his own free will.

I felt him. His *need* for his mate. He was still there, watching over me from the woods.

"Go away. I don't want to see you—*ever.*" My voice choked off on a broken sob.

His *need* disappeared beneath his walls. But not before it swelled and jabbed into my chest.

Tears wouldn't come. How I wished for that release. The only one who had been able to release me to cry thus far had killed my grandpa of his own will.

My chest tightened and my vision dimmed. I allowed the darkness to pull me into its soothing, peaceful embrace.

CHAPTER 42

A Matter of Council

ALIA

"Do we not need more wisdom, Matriarch? Could we not see what your grandmother has to say?" Elder Pulma said, his voice imploring. "We have planned this over the previous decade. They are monsters, as you well know."

I barely contained my flinch at the implication. "We will not speak of my grandfather, Elder. What you wish for will not come. Enough blood has been spilt to last many decades. Do you not recall what my brother found?"

"Of course, of course. But all those plans are going to waste when we could have used them most. Should we not use this last night of the Blood Moon to destabilize the magical community so—"

"So what? So they can be overwhelmed by humans and eradicated? If this were a werewolf council speaking of eradicating humans, we would be appalled. But because it is us humans speaking of them, it is all fine, correct?" I played with my dart gun, twirling it between my fingers.

He sputtered, his face becoming red, resembling a little red panda. "Why… Why you… You have discarded all the teachings of our generations. Turned them to ash. And for what? To protect the very monsters who killed your grandfather?" He slammed his hands down on the table.

I casually put the dart gun to my lips and blew. The dart landed between his index and pinkie finger. He shot upright, his chair falling

with a clatter behind him. “You *dare* threaten me?”

“I do not threaten, Elder Pulma. I kill. Do not think for a moment because I have mercy on all creatures that I will have mercy on you.”

Ran cackled in my mind. *Get ’em. Want me to come help?*

I nearly grinned. Ran would put him in his place. *Better leave it to me. He'd give you indigestion. Thanks, though.*

She huffed, as if disappointed.

“Sit down, you old hag. The world is changing, and if we are to survive, we need to change with it,” Elder Timone said.

Elder Pulma sat.

“What do you propose, Matriarch?” Elder Timone asked.

“We use the preparations to scour the city for dark mages. They are using their powers to gain a foothold with each being. We need to know why. We will not become spineless worms twiddling our thumbs. We are trained warriors, assassins of those who seek harm on innocents, and called protectors of magic. Our training will not go to waste.”

Elder Pulma’s scowl softened into a puzzled frown. “You do not wish complete peace?”

“Dragon spit, no. Do you really think I would hang up my cloak after all this time? Our mission has not changed, it has merely become what it was supposed to be in the beginning, before it was distorted. *Tutela vita fons*,” I said.

“Fides familia,” they finished with me.

It may take time, but we all needed change.

"What other matters do we have to attend today?" I asked.

"Rey and his father, the growing cult in the city of dissenters, your grandmother, Verand and Graham’s escape, the marketplace taxes since you have drained our coffers paying *creatures* to help with dire situations, and a situation between orphans and—"

I held up my hand. The wish to rub away the growing headache caused my hands to twitch. I couldn't show weakness. Not yet.

"Rey and his father will be excommunicated in five days. Give them enough coin—five hundred pes should do—and make them leave, never to return. Let them find their way in the world, away

from us. When my dragon's attempted murderer is found, he shall be brought before the elders on trial for the attempted murder of a fellow Red."

Elder Pulma grew red in the face. "You cannot call that *creature* a Red!"

I stared at Elder Pulma but said nothing. Then I slowly stood to my feet. "Elder Pulma, I could understand your reasoning had you not *personally* read the Banner of the Red Knights. Has wisdom been chasing you for very long? Your endurance is quite impressive."

Elder Vera coughed as Elder Timone snickered.

Elder Pulma looked confused until his eyes cleared and he scowled. "Petty insults get a monarch nowhere good, Miss Alia. You should reevaluate your methods before leading us into an early grave."

He stood and walked out.

I stared at his back as Elder Timone watched with a sly smile.

I STALKED THROUGH THE UNDERBRUSH, my headache growing ever bolder. The elders acted like children and got angry when you treated them as such. After Elder Pulma left, Elder Timone asked for the right to replace those who disagreed with us.

I was inclined to agree, except for the fact that opposing opinions were not evil. Shen and I had disagreed in the beginning, and only from that had I the courage to eventually realize my vantage point was skewed. Different opinions, when regarded with respect and handled with kindness, were what challenged us to be better individuals. But those unable to change were stuck in a mire of their own creation. And those who did not listen to opposing viewpoints were the masters of their own destruction.

So I knew I needed Elder Pulma and those who had different opinions on my council.

A grin lifted my lips. That'd shock the heck out of him.

When I walked through the yard of our home, I saw her. She was standing. On her own. Watching me with the same amount of wonder in her eyes as I had in mine.

"Anna, you're *walking*?"

Doc came out of the house, his grin broad as he watched Anna walk to me. Shen... I knew it was Shen who'd sent Doc here.

My sister was *walking*. On her *own.*

Anna tipped forward, but I was there, catching her and holding her. Laughter stuck in my throat as my soul soared beyond clouds even Ran couldn't reach.

"So what are you gonna do about it?" Anna asked.

She was my best friend, and she had been absent for so long that when she told me to spill *all* about the hunk of werewolf who'd been following me around like a lovesick puppy, it all came out in a rush. From the caves to the last time I saw him.

I leaned back, resting my head against my hand as I stared at the clouds dotting the sky. Fenbutt crawled over to me, laying his chin on my neck. I reached up and scratched his cute little white head. "I have no idea," I whispered. "On one hand, part of me thinks I should hear him out. That maybe he has a good reason. But he killed him in cold blood. And—"

"And you don't wanna get your hopes up and be hurt again."

I nearly groaned. "Could you not use your Gift on me?"

She laughed. "Hon, you know it's a part of me, just as yours is you. And heck no, I am always using this on you. You carry too many secrets for a little sis," she teased, poking my shoulder.

I rolled my head over to look at her, being careful not to upset Fenbutt, who was jumping in his sleep and releasing gas that made my eyes water. It was worth it to keep him there. His little warm body was like a balm to my soul that thawed my icy heart.

Anna's eyes were brighter since she'd been away from Rey, and even more so since he'd been in the dungeon. After the incident in the village, she'd spoken to Doc. It was as if a weight had lifted from her shoulders, one that had been slowly killing her. Her face was still gaunt and pale, her eyes still sunken, but for the first time I had hope she'd survive this and actually get to *live*.

"I missed you," I whispered, my words wobbling past the lump in my throat. Fenbutt stirred, reaching up to lick my chin as if sensing my roiling emotions.

She gathered me in her arms, holding me tight, Fenbutt right in the middle of us and loving every minute of it as he licked our faces. "I missed you, too, little sis. So what are we gonna do about this handsome hunk of love?"

"What if he's like Rey?" I voiced at last, admitting the darkest of my fears I'd hidden deep in my soul.

Her hair swished across my forehead as she shook her head. "Don't. Don't allow what happened to me be what causes you to miss out on a lifetime of love."

"But what if—"

"A life built on what-ifs is a life not lived at all. If it helps at all, Rey never respected me if I asked for space. Your Shen has."

It was true. I hadn't seen Shen since I told him I didn't want to. I had a feeling he was never far, but he didn't push for anything I wasn't willing to give.

"How do you *know,* though?" I asked. Rey had been so… charming. It was easy to believe him. To believe *in* him. He was so nice and would do things for nearly anyone. One time, he rescued a child from a burning building and was lauded as a hero. He did things like that all the time… and then went home and nearly killed his wife with his words.

"Does he protect you from himself?" Anna asked, pulling me back to the present.

Memories rolled through my mind. The time Shen first met my eyes when he was over Ran's flank, his dark eyes sparkling with amusement. The moments after I'd kidnapped him when he could've escaped but chose not to. When he fed Fenbutt because I asked and

how he'd gagged afterward. The times he took an arrow for me. Even more so was the vulnerability he showed in having me close to his back after it all and how he'd shown me a side of himself that was a bit broken and very torn.

There was also the caverns. He never took advantage of me, never even crossed my space until I was more comfortable with him. He even sharpened my blades as if he knew that would make me feel safer. He saw how uncomfortable I was and worked hard to make sure I felt secure and in control, going so far as surrendering himself into my hands and baring his neck when I was weak as a kitten.

Again and again, he'd shown gentleness and respect. Even when I'd poked and prodded, he'd merely given some back, but was never mean or inconsiderate in his teasing. He was ever respectful.

With nothing to gain from me, he gave me everything.

"I need to see him."

"Thought you'd say that," Anna said.

I squinted my eyes. "You freakin'—"

"Alia."

That voice.

My heart simultaneously broke and mended in my chest as Fenbutt bounded away from me with a low yip of excitement.

CHAPTER 43

The Confession

SHEN & ALIA

Shen

Her eyes were dull from exhaustion and cloudy with fear. She needed to take a break.

"Shen." Her voice was soft, breathy.

I bent down and picked up a wriggly Fenbutt, who licked my face and snorted in happiness as I stared down at the woman sitting in the shade of an umbrella tree.

Her dark, unbound hair fell like waves of silk down her back. She normally had it tied up, so it was quite unexpected and delightful to see flowing freely. But her face was drawn with exhaustion and her scent was tinged with a muddying. It was as if her essence was masked by a scent that was sickly-sweet. Stress.

She was here, though. And she was willing to hear me out.

I set Fenbutt down, and he dove off into the underbrush, chasing a rabbit with a mostly missing horn.

I soaked in her presence. She was my mate. I would not leave her unless she rejected me. Then I would respect her choice, even if it broke what was left of me.

But she *wanted* to speak with me.

Alia scrambled to her feet and tripped over a root. I caught her, spinning her in a circle, breathing her in, allowing her scent to ease the tightness of my chest.

Her shoulders shook, but there was no scent of tears. “I’m sorry,” she bit out.

I set her feet on the ground and caught her chin before she turned away. I ducked my head, catching her eyes. “No, please. It is I who should apologize. I kept it from you. I should have told you much sooner—”

“You should’ve, but I also should’ve given you a chance to explain. I’m sorry I ran you off at the first sign of betrayal.”

I shook my head. “You had every right, Little Red. You have every right to reject me right now, and I will do one of two things, should you ask it. I could stay as your protector, never far but always out of sight. Or I could leave, go to the far corners of this world, and you’d never have to see me again.”

“Did you practice that?” she asked, cocking her head.

I blinked. “What?”

She punched my shoulder. I grunted even though it was hardly enough to be called a slap. “You big, self-sacrificing idiot.”

“Do not forget cur.”

She snorted a laugh, her eyes growing wide as snot rained down on my tunic. I could not care less.

“You didn’t lie to me, Shen. You could’ve easily told me your mother forced you, and I never would’ve known. But you told me. You respected me enough to give me the truth. I don’t know how this is going to work out, and I want to take this slow, but I’d like to hear you out and then see where this could go.”

Lycus howled. It was a song of pure joy, teeming with uncontrollable emotion. I nearly cried. She would forever tease my stockings off were she to know of such reactions, but they were there.

I feared having lost her forever because of this. I feared she would never allow someone to watch her back or cry in their arms.

If I had to hand her off for her happiness, I would. Ripping my heart from my chest would hurt worse, but I would do it for her. But I would much prefer to remain hers forever, if she allowed.

“You need sleep,” I whispered, staring at the dark rings beneath her eyes and the sag of her shoulders.

"I won't be able to sleep until I hear you out," she replied.

"Want to sit?"

She nodded, turning to find her sister gone. Her brow furrowed in confusion, further highlighting that my worries were not unfounded. Her father and mother had helped Anna into the home behind us, and Alia had completely missed it. She was typically so attuned to her surroundings it was as if she had werewolf senses.

"I am no victim in this," I began after we had settled. I wiped my sweaty palms on my legs, then I clenched my fists and pressed against my leg to stop it from bouncing and betraying my nerves. My heart pounded a galloping rhythm in my chest that expressed my fear.

"I always had a choice. I made mine. One always likes to say there were other options, and looking back, I can see clearly how I could have made a different decision. How many options were before me…" I paused, palming one of my blades. "But I did not choose those. And because of that, your grandfather is dead."

"Why?" she asked, her voice soft and nearly knowing. Could she sense how much I wanted her to understand? How much I desired her to tell me it was ok, that I should be able to put the guilt behind me?

"There was a man and a woman. They were a love match, not fated mates. Papa spoke of Mother with glowing eyes and joy before she changed. Before she became the woman she is today. But Papa always loved her. He never gave up on her."

"Maybe he should have?" she whispered, her voice so soft it was nearly a sigh on the wind.

I looked away. "Perhaps. I could not say. I always admired him for his loyalty. I cannot say if over time the love grew cold or if Mother resented him for not being her fated mate. We never knew." I met her eyes, and though I saw the understanding there, but I was unsure I had received forgiveness. We were not yet to the worst of it. "You may wonder why I bring this to light. I was tasked with the death of the Red's matriarch. I was never there to kill your grandfather. Your grandmother had taken something from me, and I wanted her to feel the pain I'd felt."

Alia stared at me, her mouth agape.

"You see, it was not because I was forced into it. It was revenge against an innocent man. A man who dearly loved his children and grandchildren. One who rescued while his wife was the evil I was after. He was my first kill, and the one I could never wash from my fingers." I glanced down at my hands, feeling an unbearable weight crushing my soul. I never let myself go back to that night—the night everything changed—because I knew when I did remember, I would have to face the monster I had become. My fingers were painted red with his blood, the one stain that changed my life and set me beholden to my Alpha. "I went against all I knew to be right, and in so doing, I nearly became a rogue. My Alpha mother stopped my wolf from leaving. I have been beholden to her since. Until you—"

Until Alia set me free. The granddaughter of the man I murdered.

I set my head in my hands. I could not bear to look at her. "No words can help, Alia. Apologies have no grounds here. This goes beyond such trivial words. But it is all I can offer. I am sorry. I am sorry I chose evil instead of good. I am sorry I killed your grandfather. I am sorry I took him from you when you needed him most."

Alia

A BROKEN MAN sat before me. His *needs* were wrapped under whatever wall he put in place. He sat, laying out his sins for me to either absolve or condemn. But I was neither elder nor Alpha to him. This was something he had lived with for a very long time. He may be free of his mother, but he was not free of his guilt.

And there was only one who could free him from that.

"What do you expect of me?" I whispered. I tried not to be condemning, but it was there all the same. I was raw. I was hurting.

This was breaking me further.

The man I loved had made a horrible decision. He'd taken from me the only man able to protect me from my grandmother. Life would've been so much different with him here.

But I also wouldn't be the person I am today. I may be a bit stabby, a little headstrong—*a little?* Ran snuck in—and a bit of a broken mess, but I liked who I was becoming. I liked me because I had been through Sixth and back, but I'd never given up and I'd always worked hard. There were things I needed to work on, but my personal identity wasn't one of those. I liked *me.*

Shen glanced up, his eyes red, his pain stark. "I do not know," he replied.

I cocked my head, then set my hand on his cheek. "Yes, you do," I said with a tiny, sad smile. "Don't lie to yourself."

He clenched his teeth, looking away; I held him there by my hand. If anything were to happen between us, we had to move past this. I already had. He was forgiven. But until he forgave himself, there would be no change.

That was the odd thing about shame. It perpetuated a cycle of pain that brought you back around to the same mistakes you'd made to begin with. Shen had craved blood to satiate his pain—it was his drug. It had been my drug, too, once. Killing creatures for Grandmother had brought me joy. Until I found the truth. And then I found forgiveness through Fen when I released him from the Red's prison.

Until Shen forgave himself and stopped the cycle, he would make the same mistake again. Forgiveness was the pathway to true freedom.

But I couldn't tell him that. He had to find it for himself.

And if he didn't, I couldn't be with him. I wouldn't. I had seen what trying to save a person from themselves had meant through Rey and my sister: it would eventually kill my soul. He had to save himself and become the man I knew he could be. I would support him. I would be his friend. But he wouldn't steal my peace to satiate his own destruction.

Though I didn't see Shen doing such a thing, people could surprise you. So until he showed himself healing, I couldn’t be with him.

“I want you to forgive me so I can let it go,” he said at last.

His eyes never left mine. I searched his soul through them, trying to find the man I knew and hoping I hadn’t seen a mirage of what I’d hoped for. “You know I can’t do that,” I said. His entire being collapsed.

“I will go. All you need do is reject me, and you never need see me again—”

“You idiotic—GAH!” I said, throwing my hands in the air. “Would you just shut up for a moment and let me explain?”

His head jerked back to meet my eyes, confusion furrowing his brow. “What?”

“I can’t make you forgive yourself. Even if I forgive you, you won’t be free of his blood until you free yourself.”

“How?” he whispered.

“There’s a little thing called forgiveness. It doesn’t mean forgetting, it means letting go of what was to understand what is. You killed a man in cold blood. What makes you different now than you were then?” I asked.

He looked away. “I do not know.”

I nodded. “Until you know that, you won’t be able to make the changes you need.” I leaned my forehead against his. “Go get the help you need. It can’t come from me.”

He sighed, breathing in my scent. “Will you—”

“Will I?” I asked.

“Will you also get the help you need?” I scrunched up my nose. He leaned back, smiling down at it. “And do not try to wiggle out. You and I both know you are not asking for help.”

I clenched my teeth, a rising anxiety making my shoulders clench. My breath caught in my chest. There was so much to do, so many things to take care of. Everything was happening so fast, everyone needed something. The elders were waiting for me to decide on what to do about the rogues on square eleven, Anna was needing her night tea to help her sleep through the nightmares, and

the one person I thought I could depend on was needing help I couldn't give.

If I did, it would lead to him depending on me as a second mother. To look at me to get what he needed instead of providing it for himself. If I had learned anything from my parents, it was that a relationship is a partnership. You aren't there to supply what each other needs but to be their supporter so they can supply what they need for themselves.

Needs are odd things. One person can't fulfill every need a person has, and if they tried, it would be a losing battle. They would burn out and become nearly resentful.

Take those words, Two-Legs, and apply them to yourself, Ran said.

I nearly scoffed, but remembered I was sitting there with Shen. He had a knowing half smile on his face, despite the pain in his eyes.

I don't need—

Two-Legs, you need help and you won't admit it.

"What is the lovely dragon saying to put such a frown on your face?"

Lovely, hmm? He's trying to fire an ember.

Is it working? I asked, humor making my lips quirk.

Yet to be seen, she replied with a hint of warmth.

"Nothing," I said to Shen.

"You never answered my previous question."

I shrugged. "I—"

"If you say you do not need help, I will take your dragon for a ride."

"You *wouldn't*," I said, pushing his shoulder.

He sobered, becoming still as he furrowed his brows. "I wish I could be the one to be here for you, but you are right. I cannot provide for you while I am struggling myself. Can we not support each other during our trials instead of separating?"

Fear struck my core, and I didn't know why.

His eyes softened. "Why does this frighten you?"

My brows furrowed and then my mouth dropped when he tapped his nose. Blasted heightened werewolf senses. "No secrets around

that nose, huh?" I said.

He shook his head.

"I don't know how," I whispered.

"Would you like to tell me more about what you mean?"

I shrugged, picking a flower and slowly dismantling the petals. "It's been so long. I don't know how to work through things… together. I'd prefer separate."

His face fell, but he nodded. "I respect that. Dragon breath, I understand. Just… please find someone here to help you?"

My breath left again as things ran through my mind. I knew of no one I trusted enough to help. Not anyone who wasn't already overloaded.

I nodded, both of us knowing it was a lie.

CHAPTER 44

Find Your Why

SHEN

It all began when I was a child. And now I did not know how to adjust to this sudden amount of freedom before me.

I did not have to return to my old pack. I was free of Alpha Command.

The problem? I was adrift. The thing which had defined me nearly my entire life—my prison and my absolution—was gone. The woman I had tried to tie myself to in order to absolve myself of the guilt was also gone.

For the first time, I was free. It pained me to admit it, but even after years of imagining this day, I had no idea what to do. My life was oddly similar to a boat being tossed into a storm, and I had just lost both my oars.

Doc sat on his porch, reading a book and smoking a pipe that was fogging up his glasses. It was his day off from helping Alia with the needy, his day to recuperate from everything. He had come back to check on his family and relax.

I wished I could let him relax, but I knew not of another time to come for help. Besides, I trusted him to send me away if he could not handle me and my issues. He had done so before only to come back later and help me through things, explaining that he had had to recuperate his energy before assisting. I had understood and respected that about him.

"Why do you wear those blasted things?"

Doc chuckled. “For the same reason you wear different personalities, I suppose. It is an armor of a sort, to be underestimated.” He glanced at me over those glasses. “What is on your mind, Sheng-Li?”

I smiled as I sat down on the porch. I listened to the birds sing and a creek bubble that was not too far from the house. “It has been a long time since anyone has called me that.”

“It is a good name. A strong name.”

“Papa would be appalled at what I have become.”

“Your father would be shocked at what you have been through, yes. Appalled at what you did, also yes. But he would be proud of the man you have become.”

Why his words brought light to the darkness drowning my chest was a mystery. “You stab straight to the heart,” I said, though I was smiling.

Doc turned the page of his book. “It is why you come to me, yes?”

I leaned my elbows against the top step. “How does one go about getting over what I have been through?”

I heard a thud. I glanced back to see the book laying on the ground and Doc pulling his glasses off to stare at me. “Are you free, my boy?”

A tiny smile crossed my face. He sat back, almost as if his entire body had given way.

“Oh, dear boy. How long have I awaited this day!” He slowly picked up his book, hiding his deep grey eyes from me. But they still shined with a sheen of tears when he glanced up, searching me. “And how do you feel?”

I shook my head. “Adrift.”

Doc nodded, sucking his pipe and puffing out the smoke. “Makes sense. Everything you have ever known has changed in an instant, and you are now responsible for all the choices you make.”

I dropped my chin to my chest. “Yes,” I whispered.

I heard his amused puff of air. “The little Red rubbed off on you, huh? Of course she did. She is a right catch, that one.”

“She is my fated mate.”

Doc whistled. "I figured she was special to you. Did not realize how much—"

"I killed her grandfather."

His mouth closed with a snap of his teeth. "You did wha… oh dear. Better to begin at the beginning, my boy. This sounds like a right tale. I will get the missus to bring us some tea."

Doc whistled. "Your tale is quite unique. What do you want to do now?"

I ran a hand through my hair, my emotions sending spikes of pain down to my chest. It was also… freeing. A nice release. Even if it hurt, it was a healing pain. "I want to be strong. For her. But she does not seem to mind my weakness, nor does she covet my strength. I do not know how to make her see that I can care for her. She does not want to be protected, although she needs to be protected from herself. She gives and gives until she nearly dies and then gets up and does it again. I fear one day she will give and it will be her last. She has a heart so pure, so soft and kind, but strong enough to lead an entire people into a new idea they need yet do not wish to accept. I want to be there for her. I want her to ask me for what she needs instead of me having to guess. I want to be strong enough to help her mentally and physically."

"But what do *you* want, Sheng-Li? What are your goals now that you are free? You seem to have become obsessed with your mate, which is easy to do, I assure you, especially at this stage. But it is not healthy. She is not your everything, she is your other half. Your partner, should she allow it. She cannot provide you with the healing you need in order to be a healthy individual who can release the past and let the dead lie. So I ask again, what do *you want*?"

I put my head in my hands and tugged on my hair. "I do not know," I confessed.

Doc leaned back, his chair creaking. “Good, good. It is fine not to know. When you dreamed of this day, what did you wish for?”

A small smile crossed my face. “I wished for my siblings to race in the woods. To protect the innocent and the weak so the training I had gone through would not be in vain. To release my darkness so it would not taint my present.”

“Now we are talking. Let us begin with the last, shall we? Why can you not release it?”

“You know as well as I the sin I have. I gave into the bloodlust that day and let it soothe the pain.”

“You allowed the drug of pain to soothe the pain of losing your father to the Reds. You killed the one you felt responsible who turned out to be innocent, and that led you down an unforgivable path in your mind, correct?” I did not have to say it for the thoughts to be plain on my face. Doc always read me too well. “I understand your thoughts. You were a thirteen-year-old child, Sheng-Li. You were not yet a man. You were trained in the art of war and shocked into action. You made a mistake. A terrible, horrible mistake. One you need to atone for. One you must ask the Creator to forgive you for, because only he can absolve you of your wrongdoing. He is a just King and will gladly do so should you come to him. He knows you deeper than any other being will ever be able. In his eyes, you are his son. Now and always. And what you did was a mistake.”

“You make it sound so very simple. I killed a man. Took him from his family. Created the same pain in my mate as I had for losing my father.”

“You did that, yes. You did that. But can you go back and change it?” he asked. I shook my head. “Seems to me your little firecracker has yet to kill you, so I do suppose she has forgiven you. But she saw something beyond her years. Until you release the shame, you cannot live in the now, and that is not something she is willing to put up with. So you have a decision to make. Will you hold so tightly to your shame because it feels normal and safe and miss what life has to offer? *Or* will you let it go and stop playing the victim of the past and take control of your future? You have a power, my boy. You always have, you just needed to be in a place to see it. Your

strength is now in your decisions. You may not yet see it, but choice is the greatest power any of us will ever hold. And remember, a decision made is nearly always better than a decision left to fester until it is made for you."

I nodded. Not entirely certain I understood all that, but it was something I would take and chew on. Alia needed help. Everything she was holding onto was slowly killing her, whether she knew it or not.

And then I saw it.

"We are much alike," I whispered.

Doc chuckled. "Oh dear boy, you have no idea how alike and how very different the species of women are from men. You are in for a treat of your entire lifetime; *and* the greatest mystery of the universe, which will drive you to insanity."

"Heard you, you blasted piney wyvern!"

Doc grinned. "See?" he mouthed.

"Heard that too!"

Doc's face grew red as he sputtered. "There was nothing to hear, woman!"

"Wasn't there? After fifty-five years, I know how your brain works!" Mrs. Vika stepped from the house, a rolling pin in her hands and an apron powdered with flour on her generously round figure. Her face softened when she took me in. "I heard just a bit, deary. You having relational problems?"

"Our boy here found his mate. She kicked him out to get himself help to heal before she would take the lad back."

She winced. "Ouch. Sounds to me you've got you a right dragon of a girly." I barely hold in a snicker. She had no idea how true that was. "But you, you are taking it to heart, hmm? Good kid. Want me to speak with her?"

I shook my head. "I appreciate the offer, Mrs. Vika, but I would prefer to deal with this as I can myself."

"I respect that, deary. I right respect that. How's she holding up?"

Alia's pale face from the last time I saw her passed through my mind. I shook my head. "Not good. She does not like to ask for

help.”

“Sounds like someone else I know,” Mrs. Vika said. “And how many times have I gotta tell you it’s not Mrs. nothin’!”

I grinned at her, feeling as if I were once more a boy with my father introducing me to his oldest friend and his mate. Soon as I called her Mrs. Vika, she had shaken her rolling pin at me and said to simply call her Vika.

It had been a battle ever since.

“Of course, Mrs. Vika.”

“Why you cheeky little—”

“Vika, dear, we are here to help the lad, not kill him.”

“I wasn’t gonna kill ’em,” she replied. "Just rough ’em up a bit."

“Thank you,” I said to Doc.

Doc shook his head as Mrs. Vika’s eyes flashed.

“The girl is the one who stayed with the fever a while back,” Doc said, leaning back in his chair and smoking his pipe as I ducked the rolling pin. I gave him a nod of gratitude for changing the subject.

“Oh, that cute little thing? She was a Red, wasn’t she?” Mrs. Vika said, getting a swat on my arm before I was able to dodge. If the assassins knew how fast this lady was with her rolling pin, they would conscript her services.

Thankfully, no one ever knew I had had my butt handed to me on a silver platter many a time by a woman old enough to be my grandmother.

“She was. Smart little thing. Knew remedies like the back of her hand. Caring, too. Saved the behind of little Sheng-Li here before he cared for her and saved her in return. She was spicy and suspicious, but sweet.”

I dodged a flying roller pin. It sailed over my head into the trees. I trotted over to pick it up and handed it back to Mrs. Vika with a bow. She huffed, blowing a strand of gray hair from her eyes. Then she smiled and opened her arms.

My lips twitched. I stepped into her warm embrace, and I would be a dragon’s egg if it did not feel like coming home.

“You’re gonna be alright, deary. Life has struggles, but it has its good times, too. Ain’t no person ever chased a dragon who wasn’t

burned by the breath. The open skies are worth a few burns, aye?”

My body melted. Muscles which had long been clenched slowly released.

She held me as she once held a child who had lost his father and just killed a man. I had still had blood on my hands and face when she took me in her arms and nearly strangled me as I stood still as a rock, unable to cry. She had cried enough for us both as she rocked me.

This time I smiled.

And in that moment, I decided.

I would no longer let life guide me. No longer let it strip me until I was a shell of myself. No longer let it choose for me.

Bad things had come, and I had become them. I had let them define me. But I was not the things I did. I am going to be different.

Forgive me, Source of all Creation and Creator of all. I am so sorry for what I have done to your creation.

A gentle peace guided over me, soothing the jagged pains of my soul. It helped me see the mistake for what it was: a hurting thirteen-year-old boy with too much power. I had chosen wrong then and many, many times since.

But Source and her Father were just, and they gave of themselves so we could be forgiven. Now, I could focus on who I wanted to be, not on the guilt of what had been.

Source help me, life would be different.

I was taking back my power.

I was taking back my choice.

Things would no longer just happen to me. I would make things happen.

First, I would see if Alia would have me. If she would not, I would still become the man I wanted to be. Not for her, but for myself.

Because I was worth the work to be who I wanted, no matter how long it took.

CHAPTER 45

The Moon Flight

ALIA

It was the last night of the full moon. There was a bright orange light in the sky, nearly as bright as the sun itself in the black star-strewn sky.

It was the night of the people's celebration that we survived another full moon without the werewolves finding us.

"Put them over there, please," I told Brandt, who glared at me as fairies darted about his shoulders and pulled his hair. He set the buckets of water on the edge of the roof and flicked a fairy off his shoulder. I hid a grin as the tiny being sent Brandt a rude gesture she'd likely learned *from* him.

I patted Ran on the shoulder. "Ready?" I watched my people down below, spinning and dancing as laughter rose up from them.

Fire from the bonfires danced in the air. Shopkeepers offered food on sticks to cook over the fires.

I was born ready, Ran said, tendrils of smoke billowing out her nostrils.

"Ready?" I asked Jacob. He held a thumbs up from his place beside the dryad. The dryad also held up his thumbs, the ends of them sprouting flowers that he shook off before giving us a shy smile.

"Do it," I said to the fairies.

They sent up waves of glistening light that bounced to the heavens. It burst into streamers of all pastel colors: lilac, turquoise,

sky blue, orange and everything in between. The people below shouted and pointing up at the colors. The ribbons of light intertwined into a ball and then exploded in stars of light.

The people below ducked and shouted, but then they laughed when they realized it wasn't dangerous. The children chased after the darting stars of light as the adults watched in wonder.

Next, the dryad closed his eyes and set his hand on the roof. A tiny green sapling grew from his hand, then became a tiny run of ivy that raced down the side of the building and slithered beneath the feet of the people.

My Reds had brought a huge water trough up here, which the dryad dipped his other hand in. The water slowly disappeared as a tree began growing in the middle of the square. It grew until it was a bit larger than the pre-existing hedges and bonfires. It sprouted so many apples that it looked more red than green.

The dryad disconnected from the vine leading to the tree, leaning back and putting both hands in the trough.

"It'll last a few hours at most," he said, his voice lilting and slow, as if it was laborious to speak.

I bowed my head. "Thank you, kind sir. Please, take your rest. I will visit you with more water later."

He smiled. "It's the least I can do after you saved my beloved before she perished." He bowed his head and then jumped in the water trough with a splash.

I smiled. His beloved was an elf who was still recovering after losing her leg in a rogue pack attack. They had barely escaped with their lives. My Reds had found them shortly after.

"Let's go," I said to Ran, mounting her and hooking my legs beneath her wings.

She released a high-pitched trill and leapt from the roof, shooting straight up as her wings beat the wind into submission, guiding us further into the sky. She brought us high enough to be just beneath the orange moon and snapped her wings open to catch the air. The orange light highlighted her silver scales and made her glow with the outline of the moon at our back.

She tucked her wings and I leaned forward against her neck, hooking my knees further under her wing joints. My eyes watered as I tried to keep them open, but the wind was too much.

For a split second, I imagined tumbling off the side and just free-falling until I hit the ground.

Keep the vivid imagination to yourself, Rider, Ran grumbled. *I* won't *let you fall.*

I grinned at her disgruntled voice. She flung out her wings, catching the air with a jolt that I stuck with near ease—again, because of all the practice she'd put me through.

She fluttered down to the square, gently landing with her back legs and then her front. The people were staring at me, their mouths wide and eyes glittering in the fire.

I slid from Ran's back, thankful I didn't fall flat on my face at the landing. She was dratted tall.

Ran curled her wings to her body and yawned.

The people circled around. Some had apples in their hands from the tree and others were staring at Ran with wonder. Others still looked like they wanted to stab me. At least it wasn't everyone; we were getting somewhere.

"You all know my goals," I began.

"Ya're a bleeding heart who will run us into the ground!"

I tried to find the person who spoke, but they were lost in the crowd.

"Perhaps I am a bleeding heart. I am a heart that feels, that loves, and that will give you lives we never could have accomplished before." No one spoke, which I took as a good sign. A few even looked confused or interested. "We have struggled in the past. We have had droughts where we lost many good people. We have dealt with crop failures which resulted in starvation." I paused, staring at those around me. "I lost my older sister many years ago to a ravaging disease because we did not have enough food to keep her healthy." I had to pause as my voice cut off as a hollow ache formed in my soul. Grief never died, it just became easier to live with. "But now? We have a chance. A chance to change things. To make them

better. It will not be easy. It will come with bumps and hardships and pain. But what good thing ever came easily?”

More heads nodded than I expected.

“I trusts you, Matriarch Alia!” someone called out. A man with a bald head was wringing his hat in his hands. He saluted me with a hand to his heart, and I smiled at him. He wasn’t starving and had a business because of Ran’s scales. “You did right by me and my family, Matriarch. Saved us. We thanks you!”

More voices joined in, drowning out the bad. It was funny. It took a hundred positive voices to drown out the one that was negative. But where there was positive, negative was choked out and obliterated.

“Ye kept my family from starvation!”

“That werewolf saved me child from a cougar in the woods.”

“A fairy helped my child find her schoolwork.”

“Ya helped when no one else would listen and saved my sister and I from our abusive father,” another said.

Others spoke up, until it was a patter of what had happened, how they had been helped, and who had helped them.

My lips trembled as emotion ran through me, seeing all those we had helped the past weeks being brave enough to stand up for me. I held up a hand and they quieted. “Thank you. All of you. With the help of our new friends, we can make our tribe stronger than ever. By working together, there is nothing we cannot accomplish. Are you with me?”

A cheer rose and I smiled, raising my hand. Ran’s throat grew red before she released a massive blue and red flame into the sky.

And as I watched my people, I grew hopeful.

If my people could come together and conquer their prejudices, perhaps there was hope for all the worlds.

CHAPTER 46

Understanding Builds Trust

ALIA

I walked down the street, pausing to meet people where they were.

A family had lost their home to a fire. I watched as werewolves helped lift the heavy timber as builders pounded it into place, the family bringing them water and food with smiles and laughter. I had put the peace-loving group known as Pacem in charge of allocating where the magical creatures could best assist.

The leader of the Pacem, known as Pax, had immediately set up a banner in front of their main office—yes, where I *accidentally* left the unicorn pelt in my younger days. It read 'Come, those who need help.'

It was an idea I'd had a while back and had set into place with Mom's help. The magical creatures could do things none of us humans could, and that made them priceless if we let them be. I was thinking in terms of the best things for my tribe, but it also helped the creatures who came here and had nowhere to return. Many left after they were healed, or I sent my Reds to guide them home. Others, however, had lost their houses or families and were on their own and in need of a place to call home.

I stopped before the shop front and saw a line about twenty people long, some wringing their hands or shifting their feet. Only the desperate asked for help around here. I hoped to change that, but it was what it was for now.

Two Reds held their post beside the poor secretary, who scribbled down the problems and gave them to a runner. The runner would then take it to a committee who would find the best creature willing to help.

I had allocated funds to pay those who helped. Not all wanted to accepted it; most were just grateful to have a place that accepted them after years alone. I'd insisted, seeing as they needed to find a way to buy food and a place to live after they left the Matriarch's Tent. Ultimately, they were helping the community and saving lives, and *that* was priceless.

Later, I would need to impose some rules to keep everything fair to those who helped and to keep the strongest from strong-arming their way into the best-paying jobs, but until problems arose, I would let them police themselves.

So far, a werewolf had helped safely find a missing child who was lost in the woods; an orphanage near a river on the east side of town had flooded and the dryad helped send the water back to where it belonged; and a mage had helped find a man trapped in a mine.

The people were turning. Most even stopped to bow to me as I walked down the street, their smiles bright and their eyes filled with cheer. It warmed my soul.

I paused at the front of the line beside a woman in a green cloak who was watching with her arms crossed.

"How is it going?" I asked her. She turned dark eyes on me, her skin the color of warm coffee with cream. I was taken back to a time when her husband had saved my life at the cost of his own. My heart turned painfully in my chest. Her eyes narrowed as if she, too, were thinking of sad times.

I had been the one to bring back her husband's cloak, and she'd told me to ensure his sacrifice wasn't in vain.

I hoped, at long last, that I had made him proud.

"It is going. There is much yet to be done. We have developed a code of needs for the slips: red for emergencies, green for those who will survive a few hours without help, and a bit of everything in

between." She stared at the people, her eyes warm with compassion. "Nevertheless, some we do not help in time."

I closed my eyes and bowed my head as the little sphinx baby we'd lost came to mind. "I understand," I said. A moment of silence passed as we were lost in our own thoughts. "Do you need anything further from me?"

She turned to face me straight on, arms crossed. "Stop hunting animals."

I took a deep breath, trying to push back my annoyance that flared. *Ask a question, don't get into an argument,* I coached myself. "Can you tell me why you ask for this?"

She blinked, as if that took her by surprise. Her crossed arms relaxed a bit. "There are so many innocent animals losing their lives day to day. They do not deserve to be skewered just so we guilty humans can live."

A sad smile crossed my lips. "You were once a Red," I said at last.

I felt her *need.* It was one I had felt in many of my current Reds, but it was deeper as if the shame had followed her for much longer. It was a *need* to know she was in the right place, doing the right thing. She had much to atone for and was doing her best to do so.

"Do not worry, Miss Pax. I will not force anyone to fight who does not wish to. My duty is not to enforce what I believe is right, but to empower the people to fight for what they know is right."

"So who makes the rules of what is right and wrong?"

A grin crossed my face. Her frown deepened into a scowl as I chuckled. I held up a hand before she could open her mouth to curse me out for laughing at her. "I am sorry, it is just that I am definitely not wise enough yet to determine right from wrong. Just yesterday I nearly skewered my best doctor because he startled me. No, right and wrong are determined by Source, and I work to uphold those laws and no others."

"And if I do not believe in Source?"

"Then by what authority do you create your own laws?"

She opened and closed her mouth.

"Exactly. There must be a baseline for morals, or else we run wild with our own, which is often wrong as our baseline of understanding often skews them. So unless there comes a time where I find out something different, then I will follow Source's rules and the Book of the Reds."

She stared at me. I thought I'd broken her.

Before long, she bowed her head and walked off.

I turned and went around a corner before leaning against a wall, my breath coming in harsh spurts as my heart tried to bruise my ribs. Heck, that was hard. I wasn't one for confrontation, but I'd better get used to it. It seemed like all I did anymore.

"Well done, madame. You handled that better than any I have ever seen." I glanced up at Enforcer Markus, who held a water skin out to me.

"Thanks," I panted, taking a sip.

His lips tipped up in a smile as I gulped air quicker than a fish outta water. "Why does that frighten you so?"

My eyes widened. "Frighten? Honey, I'm terrified out of my soul. That was freakin' *hard*."

Markus chuckled. It was a light sound filled with warmth, which was totally at odds with… him. "And yet, you handled it so very well."

"Because I knew what she needed. She needed to know what she was following was not just human-created rules. *Again*. It had failed her once when she was a Red. She didn't want it happening again."

"Perhaps this is why you were given such a Gift. Source knew you would need it," he said, as if thinking it through as he said the words. He bowed, his hair nearly brushing the ground. "I am deeply honored to be your guard, madame."

I gave a choked laugh. "I'm over here about to pee myself in fear and you're *honored.* And heck, you're much more than a mere guard, Markus. You're my friend."

He glanced up so quickly he staggered as the blood rushed down from his head. "I am what, madame?"

"My friend."

His eyes widened. His mouth opened and closed. He blinked rapidly. Were those tears glittering in his eyes?

Did I break him, too?

"I am honored," he repeated, the words as reverent as a prayer.

"Good. Now let's get back to the Tent. I've had enough socializing for one day."

"And food, madame?"

I blinked at him, my nose scrunching. "What?"

"You have not eaten in three hours. I was advised to insist you find food every four. It is only a *friendly* thing to do."

I stared. He kept his eyes roving and his body loose and ready to pounce, not even glancing at me. Did he… did he just crack a joke?

I must be losing it.

"When that blasted poppycock of a werewolf returns, Imma kill him," I muttered. "Getting all up in my business even when he's not here. *GAH!*"

Enforcer Markus trotted along behind me as I stopped to get a meat stick from a stall. He watched as they prepared it from scratch and took a bite first before passing it to me.

I ate it sullenly on my way back, missing a certain dark-haired werewolf and *never, ever* admitting it.

CHAPTER 47

Keep Your Friends Close

ALIA

"Care to be my first councilor?" I asked.

Elder Pulma jumped with a tiny squeal. He wasn't a Red accustomed to physical attacks and training, otherwise he would've known I was there. I wasn't exactly hiding; in fact, I thought he saw me because he glanced right at me before passing me.

I stifled a smile.

"All you Reds, always sneaking around like some sort of dragon larvae, thinking it will get you to power. But I have a surprise for you! It will not get you a darn thing from me."

I came out of the shadows. "I sneak because I know there are those who work against me. You are open in your disagreements, which gives me hope that you would tell me when I am making a dragon's flame out of things and help me see reason. We may never see eye to eye nor will we always agree, but I need that in my life. I need you, Elder Pulma."

His jaw dropped. "You.. you what?"

"Elder Pulma, I was not joking. Would you be my first councilor as Matriarch of the Reds?"

He crossed his arms, but his face was slowly growing less red. "Why have you not asked Elder Timone?"

I shrugged. "He tells me what I want to hear, not what I need."

Elder Pulma's eyes narrowed. He tapped his chin with his thumb, thinking as he watched me. "Perhaps you are not so childish after

all," he said at last.

"And perhaps wisdom has caught you."

He chuckled. "You are a right conundrum, miss. But perhaps you are just what this dry, old kingdom of assassins needs. I will be your councilor on one condition."

I tensed. "Ask," I said.

"Do not blow those daggum darts at me when we disagree!"

I laughed and shook his forearm.

I TRUDGED down the forest path. My bones ached after sparring with the up-and-coming sprites. They were good, but not good enough.

A tiny half-smile crossed my lips at the look of awe on their faces when I showed them how to take down a werewolf. Fen was kind enough to assist. He nearly took me out, but in the end I got him with a knife to the throat. We'd both grinned and I'd helped him to his feet as I fielded questions.

Yes, you could take down a mage; you just need to know the price of their magic before you knew how to take them.

No, I didn't know the cost of my magic.

Yes, I had killed a mage before.

No, I didn't hunt mages for fun.

I sighed and rubbed my eyes. We'd created feral, blood-thirsty, up-and-coming Reds.

As if you're any different, Ran said. I felt her in the trees beside me, following along, making sure I was safe.

Of course I'm different, I replied. *I never asked someone if hunting people was* fun*.*

Didn't you?

I winced. *That was one time!*

Mhmm.

Great. My blasted dragon's calling me out.

It had been six days since I ran Shen off to help himself. A part of me wished I'd taken him up on the offer of working through everything together; the other part tried to convince me this was better. This meant I could work on things here and get my rule cemented before I had a relationship to complicate things.

No one knew I was Shen's mate. They couldn't. They'd likely skin us both and use our bones for toothpicks. The tribe was better about not outright killing magical creatures, but they were not quite ready for a werewolf as the matriarch's Hunter.

And I didn't know if they ever would be.

A twig snapped.

I spun, dart gun at my lips, and saw a broad chest and gleaming, golden eyes.

"Shen, you ninny. I could've killed you."

"No, you would not have," he said, smiling.

I couldn't help the way my heart jumped at his voice, nor the way I ached to run into his arms. I held myself back. "What did you find?" I asked, crossing my arms and tapping my foot.

He stalked forward, his movement powerful like a panther on the prowl.

I nearly grinned, my heart jumping for joy at the change I saw before me. Last time I saw him, he was a weary and battle-worn werewolf. Now he was different. I wasn't sure what I was seeing. He wasn't the same as the teeming and alive werewolf I had seen at the waterfall in years past, but he wasn't the werewolf chained to his own guilt, either.

"I found myself," he said. "I found choices, which are downright terrifying. I found forgiveness, not in what I can do for myself, but from the Source of all."

I let the smile cross my lips. "You did?"

He nodded, stepping closer. "I am sorry, Alia, for all the pain I brought to you and your family. I can never bring your grandfather back, but this is something I can do." He brought something out of his cloak. I blinked at it, not realizing what it was. Then I gasped in awe.

"Is that—?"

"A mage stone, yes. I know you used your last one for the sphinx. I supposed I should not bring you a dead deer to let you know I will provide, but I can bring things you may need."

I accepted the stone, tucking it into the special pouch near my heart.

"Thanks."

"Alia, nothing I ever do will make the past right. And if you still choose to reject me, I will understand—"

"Shut up, you big lug. If I haven't rejected you yet, I'm unlikely to do so." I squinted up at him. "It'll take time to build trust again."

"I understand and respect that. You have every right to be angry."

I shook my head. "That's just it—I'm not angry. Frustrated, disappointed, and afraid, yeah. But not angry."

A fleeting wince crossed his face. "That is nearly worse."

"Sorry," I said with a tiny, awkward grin.

"It is not your fault. I am facing the consequences of my own actions, Little Red. Never apologize for the feelings you have."

I nodded. "What do you want from this? From us?" I didn't know what to make of him. Part of me thought he'd refuse to do the work. Refuse to find the means to heal and change. And I was scared that this was too fast. Change doesn't come overnight. It's weeks and months of striving and hoping and failing and overcoming. Only time and action would reveal if this was a lasting change or a fleeing moment.

"I do not know. I only know I want to explore this, to find out where it leads."

I snorted a laugh. "So you, a werewolf, wishes to court me, a Red?"

He prowled forward, eyes glowing gold. I slowly stepped back until my back was against a tree. He put his hand on the tree beside my head and leaned down. I could see the individual white hairs that made up the scar on his eyebrow.

"No, Little Red, I want to mate you," he whispered, his breath tickling my ear.

A shiver ran down my spine.

I ducked his arm and shoved his elbow. He face-planted into the tree with a grunt.

I gasped, staring at him as he held his nose. "I'm so sorry—"

He laughed. It started small but built until he leaned against the tree for support. His eyes caught me, and in them I saw light and warmth. I cracked a grin, even though my heart was having trouble understanding that we weren't in danger cause it was trying to bruise my ribs.

That ain't no fear, idiotic and naive Two-Legs, Ran said with a cackle.

I shoved her out of my brain.

He stopped chuckling, his dark eyes warm with both mirth and something I couldn't—or wouldn't—name as he checked his nose for blood. "Remind me not to do that again," he said to my answering wince. But he held up his hand, stopping me before I could apologize again. "I am the one who should apologize, Alia. Lycus gets away from me at times."

I blinked. "Lycus?"

He rubbed his thumb on his dagger. "My wolf."

"Your wolf is a different entity?"

He stared at me for a moment. "You did not know?"

I shook my head.

"A werewolf's animal side is a part of us. Our soul is split at birth. Our human side is what you see, but within lay the animal, the wolf you met when you set us free."

All of that made zero sense. It was a bit like going into a cave without a light and wondering if you were about to be eaten by a hibernating bear or if you were safe. "Can he speak to me?" I asked.

A tiny smile crossed his lips, his eyes burning around the edges. "Sweetheart, he wants to do much more than that. But he knows you are not ready for the extent of his devotion, so he is holding back."

He tweaked my nose and I unscrunched it. "Let him out. I wanna meet him."

He shook his head, even though his eyes glowed bright for a moment. "Not yet."

"What, afraid I'm gonna be scared off?"

His chuckle was deep and sent tingles down to my toes. "No, I am afraid you would scare *him* off."

My honk of laughter scared a very disgruntled owl from its slumber.

"What does mating mean?" I asked, trying not to show a hint of the apprehension boiling in my gut.

But his sharp eyes softening said he noticed the slight increase of my heartbeat. "Mating is a bond between werewolves. A way to connect the souls. For fated mates, it is an increase of what has already been; we are tied on a soul-deep level. Mating is the next step, should you wish it. But you can also sever the bond anytime you wish with rejection, even after mating."

I scuffed my toe along the pathway, not able to look him in the eye. "What—" I swallowed, my throat going dry. "What does that mean?"

He put his finger beneath my chin and slowly lifted my eyes to his. There was a soft, gentle smile caressing his lips. "It is a tying of the souls, not of the physical bodies. That comes later, after both have settled into their mate's minds and wish to complete the bond."

"So… it's almost like an engagement?"

"A bit. It is a promise and a connection. I will know you on a soul-deep level, as you will know me."

I gulped down my nerves. The prospect was terrifying—and electrifying. Why did I always feel I was on the edge of a cliff when I was around him?

Because vulnerability is terrifying to your sensibilities.

Shut up, Ran.

She snickered, but went silent.

I found Shen's eyes waiting on me, studying me.

"What does it entail?" I asked at last, and his eyes sparkled with happiness.

"You will allow me to mark you, and allow my wolf into your soul."

"That's it?" I asked, narrowing my eyes at him.

"It is much more than it sounds, but yes, that is all it takes."

“Then let's… Wait, is it something you want?” I asked, staring up at him and laying a hand on his chest. His heart pounded against my hand. It somehow soothed me to know he was just as discombobulated as I was.

He opened and closed his mouth.

You broke him, Ran cackled in my mind.

I could see the answer in his eyes.

“Why don’t we do it now?” I whispered, my voice shaking. I wanted to know him. To know if his soul was as gentle as the being I saw in his eyes.

The darkness in his eyes lit with something soft and warm. He took my hand from his chest and brought it up to his lips. “Soon, sweet Alia, you will be mine. But you will first think this through. Speak with your loved ones, seek out those who know what the bond entails, and ensure a broken werewolf is who you want as a friend for life.”

A shiver ran up my arm where his warmth pressed against my skin and continued down my spine. “You are what I want, Shen.”

His eyes widened, and then they glimmered. Were those tears? “You have given me many gifts, Little Red, but your trust is the most precious thing I hold dear. Please, take your time. And next time you ask, nothing will hold me back.”

A part of me felt a hint of relief. I wanted this, wanted to know him fully, but he was right to encourage me to make certain I was ready.

Deep down, I knew someday I would be. I loved him, and I didn’t want to regret not being with him for the sake of fear. But taking the time to make sure… that was wise.

CHAPTER 48

Family

ALIA & SHEN

Alia

I walked through the marketplace stalls and spoke with the people with wolven Shen—or should I say Lycus?—by my side and Enforcer Markus somewhere behind us.

The market was bustling in the Third district as I slowly made my way toward a group of tiny fairies who splashed in a water fountain, people standing around and watching as they made the water glow with ribbons of lights. It seemed innocent, but I wanted to make sure there wouldn't be problems.

"Too many, I say. They infiltrate just to kill us all!" one woman said to another standing by their stalls. Shen and I were just around the corner. I paused, listening. Yes, I was a shameless eavesdropper.

"But the book—"

"Book? Bah. Some young upstart just brought the book to make her own way. Could you imagine doing the Rite against your own grandmother? The former mistress led us well for ages. She's been matriarch for as long as I remember. Rule needs go back to her, I say."

"It's been easy to raise buildings, though. Them werewolves aren't only strong, but they help out wherever they can. Spoke with one the other day, and she was right cordial and even helped take my bushel to market."

Another voice chimed in. “A unicorn helped raise the wagon off old man Grant when the crash happened down on Second.”

“That firebird dragon stopped my house from going up in flames. And that new matriarch knew Miss Elda was struggling to feed her eight children. She gave her all she needed to get back on her feet, even sent a horned rabbit to grow her a garden!”

Shen nudged my hand. I glanced down at him, tears in my eyes.

We weren’t perfect, and not everyone was happy, but overall? We were moving in the right direction. And that was all I could hope for.

While keeping an eye on the fairies, I stopped by another shopkeeper’s place. She sold leather collars for dogs.

I glanced down at Shen, who pointedly avoided my gaze.

The shopkeeper grinned. “Perhaps the madame would like to look at some of our extra-large collars?” she asked with a wink.

I stifled a laugh as Shen’s ears flattened against his skull.

“I would love to,” I said. I pointed to a bright-red collar that had ‘PRINCESS’ stitched in silver. “Does that one come in extra large?”

Shen glanced up as if he couldn’t help himself. Then he gave me the most baleful, pitiful look I’ve ever seen on an animal.

“I suppose the werewolf doesn’t like this one?”

I chuckled. “I don’t know why not. I’ll take it.”

After I paid, the shopkeeper came out and bent down before Shen. She looked at him with wonder. She was young, maybe around thirteen. “I’ve never seen one so close. I always wanted to.”

“You can pet him,” I said.

Shen sighed. A quiet snicker came from my back from Enforcer Markus, who kept getting closer with the press of the crowd.

“I don’t think he’d like that, but thank you kindly, m’lady.”

We left that shop front soon after, but my heart was full. That girl had been confident enough to stand in front of Shen and even tease us. It gave me hope.

The fairies had gathered quite a few people and were still putting on a show. The people oohed and the children clapped. One little child with a leg that couldn’t quite walk correctly went up and gave one of the fairies a coin.

The fairy took it gingerly, awe in her wide eyes as her pink wings fluttered behind her. She gave the child a kiss on the cheek and soon more people were giving the fairies coin.

I shook my head with a smile.

Shen growled. I glanced back to see him on his feet with his scruff raised. He was facing outward toward the edge of the city; I couldn't see what he sensed for the houses and buildings blocking the path. I walked over to him, and I saw his eyes. They were aglow with his wolf.

And then I felt the *needs.* To hunt. To kill. To be set free of this realm. Then there were many more with normal *needs*. All of them were radiating from outside the city. An entire army. My chest tightened.

"I feel them," I said, kneading my hands into his fur. He whined, stepping in front of me.

"Get the sickly and the children to the safe houses, Enforcer Markus, and rally our enforcers and Reds. I must find my grandmother," I said. Grandmother may be a right dragon flame with her own misguided sense of right and wrong, but she knew the best way to defend our people. And I could count on her to want to do that, at the very least. It might even be her way of redeeming herself.

Shen crouched, but I shook my head. "You need to see if you can tell why they're here. If we can get out of this without a fight…" He nodded, licking my cheek. He stared at me and then leaned his forehead against my own with a sigh before he pulled back.

Be safe, his eyes said.

I nodded. "You too."

He released a low bark and wagged his tail while bounding away.

The surrounding people were staring in confusion. "Set aside your differences for today. We are under attack. Protect your fellow man, but do not kill unless in defense. Spread the word!"

The people saluted and ushered the children off. Enforcer Markus guided them, and some fairies hitched rides on the shoulders of the children. Further down, neighbor told neighbor, until the entire row of the marketplace was ushering the sickly folk and children to the

safe houses. Soon, the entire city would be on lockdown with capable citizens and Reds set to protect them. That is where the sprites would come in, for they would guard the safe houses while we fully-fledged Reds would fight.

Pride pulled at my heart. I'd seen the way the people in the regular cities reacted to threats. They typically screamed in terror and fell over each other like a teeming mass of ants to get away from the threat. Panic never did any good. And my people knew that.

I let a smile cross my face before I took off at a sprint. I grabbed Jacob on the way, telling him to get Mom and Dad and bring them to safety. Our location was compromised.

I just hoped I wasn't the one who'd done this.

He took off at a sprint.

I raced to get to the Matriarch's Palace and shoved through the door.

"Grandmother!" I yelled. Then I saw her.

"Hello, *Granddaughter*," she said playfully. Her eyes flashed golden. She wore a simple white dress with golden piping along the edges. Her hair was in a sharp bun with a headdress behind it like some sort of goddess. A silver chain decorated her neck. She had eyes of pure amber, even when they did not glow with her inner werewolf. Her skin was smooth and pale, nothing like my own deep-tanned skin. Her lashes were long. I could not say what her age would be. It wouldn't surprise me if she were twenty or two hundred.

Who was she, and why the heck was she in my grandmother's house?

"You, my dear, have been a naughty, naughty girl," the woman said. She was definitely not my grandmother, but two could play this game.

"What bright eyes you have, Grandmother," I replied, saying the last word just as sarcastically as she called me *granddaughter*, slowly pulling a blade from beneath my cloak.

"All the better to see you with, *my dear*," she replied, her teeth elongating and her nose growing.

"What sharp teeth you have, Grandmother," I replied.

She chuckled, snapping those teeth as her arms shortened and her bones popped in the longest shift I'd ever seen. "All the better to eat you with, *my dear*," she hissed through clenched teeth.

I threw my blade. She caught it between her teeth, snapping it into metal slivers. I attacked, sweeping her feet out from under her before she could fully form and stabbing with a second blade. She growled and snapped at my throat, but I jumped back, chest heaving, two blades in my hands.

"If my son cannot do what needs to be done, I will do it myself!" Her words ended in a sharp growl, her shift complete. She was a pure-white werewolf with amethyst eyes. Drool dropped between her teeth, pooling on the floor.

"Where's my grandmother?" I hissed.

She leapt.

I ducked.

Shen

My paws bounded beyond the town's borders and into the woods. There, black mages gathered with snarling half-wolf, half-man creatures.

Rogues, Lycus whispered.

That was almost us. Would have been if not for Alia.

I growled and shifted, my bones snapping and popping as I emerged a man. "Who is in charge here?" I asked, the words a demand threaded with all the authority I held as an Alpha.

A Red stepped forward.

"I am," he said, pushing back his hood. It was the man who betrayed Alia.

"You," I growled, feeling Lycus push forward.

The rogues growled back.

"Me. Are you going to chase me again, little wolf? Or shall this be a fair fight?"

"Fair would be you leaving."

"Oh, you don't understand, do you?"

A few things clicked into place. The way this army showed up, just close enough to get a reaction from us. The way there had been calculated attacks to drive Alia's people away from her. How her grandmother had been silent all this time when a woman as stubborn as she would have fought to the death to get her power back.

Maybe she was. Not in the way we expected, but in a way that was much worse.

Graham cackled as he saw the dawning on my face. "Oh, now you get it. She won't be under your thrall for much longer."

I turned, shifting into my wolf mid-leap.

"Run, little wolf, run. And hope you aren't too late."

Alia

I DROVE a blade up as the white werewolf jumped over me. I adjusted my grip so it nicked the werewolf's back leg. The werewolf let out a single howl that was filled with rage.

"Aurelia!"

I turned, seeing my grandmother at her throne, her crossbow trained on the white werewolf. She pulled the trigger, but the shot went wide, thunking into the wall. The werewolf snarled and leapt up the red runner toward Grandmother. I barreled into the werewolf and sent her skidding from the rug with a blade in her shoulder.

She tried to get up, but her claws slipped on the polished floor. It gave me the split second I needed to get ahead of her. I ran toward

Grandmother, the werewolf snapping at my heels. I arrived at the throne half a second before the werewolf.

I turned to place myself between Grandmother and the white werewolf, who gave me a half-grin as she slid to a stop. She backed away, her tail wagging.

Grandmother snaked a hand around my neck and dug her thumb and forefingers into my neck where it met my chin. My rapid pulse thrummed against her fingers, though my heart felt frozen by her betrayal.

She placed a dagger to my throat just below her hand. I swallowed, feeling the blade dig into my larynx with the movement. I froze.

"What a wonderful granddaughter you are. You were always so driven by what was right. Too bad you outlived your usefulness."

The white werewolf sat, cocking her head with a lazy grin creasing those long, pearly teeth as blood slowly dripped down her back leg to pool on the floor.

"You were such a promising child. So full of fire. If only you had followed my teachings and the teachings of those who came before. Then you would have been my successor in truth."

"I was never going to be your successor," I said.

"Of course you were. You were the chosen. Bred specifically for your parents' qualities over generations. You were the accumulation of your ancestors' hopes and dreams. The strongest of us against the strongest of them. You were our prodigy… and you broke it all. For what?" She tsked. "You forced me into this, dear girl. Forced me into siding with the enemy to gain back my rightful place. Such a shame." She shook her head.

"I may keep you. You could still be of use. Just not as you are now…" The knife left my throat. She dragged it down my collarbone and then pressed against the back of my shoulder, slowly piercing right where the ligament meets the joint. I tried to jerk away, but her fingers tightened around my throat, nearly cutting off my airway. My struggles to pry her fingers off were futile as she held me there, blood making a warm trail down my back.

A growl erupted *behind* me. The heavy weight of my grandmother was ripped from my back. I spun. Shen was standing between my grandmother and me, his head low to the ground and foam dropping from his lips. I turned, putting my back to his so I could watch the white werewolf.

"You two may keep each other. This tribe is finished. Have fun dying," Grandmother said. She threw down an orb. It exploded, smoke billowing and making fire race down through nose to my lungs.

I darted forward, my knife outstretched, but Grandmother was no longer there.

By the time we finished coughing, it was just us and a white werewolf. Scratch that. She was flanked by another werewolf, a black werewolf with a white-tipped tail and two white ears.

Shen

ALIA WAS BLEEDING. My mate smelled of pain.

And I wanted blood, a thousand times over, to pay for every drop of her precious lifeblood that had been spilled. But the one who had wounded her was gone.

I turned. Mother was here. And so was my eldest sister, her eyes questioning as she stared between me and Alia. I needed to be able to speak, so I shifted into my human form.

Alia's grandmother must have been working with them this entire time. Which confused me.

It appeared her grandmother was not strong enough to amass the power she craved while greater, more powerful beings outclassed her, so she sent the assassins she brainwashed to do her dirty work.

But why all this? Why take out the tribe she worked so hard to build? Unless she was near her goal and no longer had need of them.

My mother shifted into her human form, standing to her full height. Her eyes filled with tears. She reached out her hand, taking a step toward me.

"You are at last strong enough to lead, my precious child. Long have I awaited the day for you to shake off the chains, to find your freedom. For now, you are strong enough to be Alpha King. To take your rightful place as ruler of this realm."

Beatrice transformed, her body cracking and popping as smooth skin replaced her dark fur. She remained on her knees and stared at mother. "What?"

I thought Mother had said this before merely to get a rise from me. But she truly meant for *me* to take over the pack? The son she abhorred?

"You were only ever a placeholder, my dear," Mother told Beatrice. "Your brother has always been the true heir."

What was Mother's angle here?

Regardless, Mother had miscalculated. Beatrice was the loyal one. A loyal werewolf could handle many things. Except betrayal.

"I am not your heir?" Beatrice's voice was oddly sweet. Beatrice was not sweet.

Mother stared at Beatrice. "Did you not realize? A female is not meant to lead. You and I were merely placeholders for my son. I have given my life to train him up in the ways of a powerful warrior Alpha—"

"You taught me nothing of strength, Mother," I said.

Her head snapped around, her eyes narrowing. "I taught you strength and resiliency through adversary. I taught you how to live—"

"You taught me how to survive. You taught me how to kill. You taught me that to be a leader is to be heartless."

She stared at me. Then her eyes grew golden. "Ungrateful brat. How long have I put up with your dalliances? Even encouraged them so you'd find the strength to break your chains. You think I did not

know about the pup and the Red? You think I did not know how you took your sisters under your protection? You think I did not know that you spoke sweet words in my ear, all the while doing everything in your power to spite me?"

I stepped back as her eyes grew so golden they were nearly yellow… and then they turned white. Had everything I known been a twisted lie from the start? Displeasure threaded through me. Was it all a manipulation? Did I finally do what she wanted of me after so long?

A part of me wished she had screamed and yelled, called me a cur of a son, and told me how horrid I was for betraying her. But she stood before me wanting such a betrayal? Her reaction cheapened my rebellion until I felt like nothing but a young, embarrassed boy berated by his mother for eating the laying hens.

A tiny hand rested on the crook of my arm. I glanced down. Alia turned her face up, her eyes bright with fury, but her voice the calm in the storm of my emotions. "There is only a drop of belladonna in a wine glass," Alia whispered for my ears alone. "But it turns the entire glass into death."

I stared into her eyes as my mother raged about how she had given all for me and how she had raised me to overcome all hurdles, including Command.

I lightly trailed my half-formed claws down Alia's cheek. "You are correct," I whispered through the fangs protruding from my lips. I did not even realize I had partially shifted.

I rotated to face my mother. "You gave me no choice," I said, cutting through the tirade of her lies and half-truths.

"What choice did you need? You were a child, unable—"

"Unable to choose. Unable to even understand what was expected of me. And you watched as I was trained in the arts of secret keeping, torture, espionage, and assassination. Once, I only wished to please you. But no more. Your vitriol may sound pleasant to the ears, but your actions are poison to the soul."

"All I ever did was for you!" she cried, fat tears rolling down her cheeks. "Please believe me, all I did. It was all for *you*."

"No, Mother. It was all for you."

Alia's hand disappeared from my chest as she walked forward to the woman kneeling on the ground. I reached out for Alia, but she evaded my hand, shooting me a look, asking me to trust her. I clenched my fists at my sides, trying to let her go.

"You were born an innocent child," Alia said, her voice soft.

"What is this which you speak, human demolisher? You cannot know me," Mother said, snarling in disgust.

"You were an innocent child who broke. They broke you. Many times," Alia whispered.

"You… you know *nothing.*" Mother's voice gave at the end.

"And then they played with you. Made you into their little werewolf. But you rose, didn't you? You killed them."

"I did not kill them." Mother sneered, her face twisting until it was nearly unrecognizable from the cold being I had known my entire life. "They slowly lost all will to live when I took everything from them. Every inch of coin was mine. Every debt was mine to hold. And I cashed out."

Alia shook her head, her fists clenching against her blades. "You were so young. How could they have treated you so wrong?"

"They did not see it as such. I was merely a means to an end."

"But you loved them."

"They were my parents. How could I not?"

In those few short words, I understood. My mother was not born the manipulating woman she was leading up to that moment. She had been made into a manipulator.

"You loved them, and they hurt you. With their words. With their actions. How did it make you feel?"

"Worthless. Helpless. Weak," Mother whispered.

And in those words, I *knew*. She raised me to never know those three things. In her own, twisted way, she was trying to protect me in the only way her gnarled mind knew how. She did the opposite of what her parents did to her to make me the strongest werewolf possible.

"I only wanted their love. I only wanted them to be proud of me. But they used me," she said. "Sold me to the highest bidder. They

climbed up the ladder of the packs because of me, and I was left holding the cut rope at the bottom of the abyss."

Alia went down to her knees before my mother, the salty tang of sweet tears reaching my nose. "And you haven't seen the light since, have you?" she whispered.

Mother shook her head, covering her mouth as a sob erupted from her lips. She was nothing more than a broken, tortured creature.

"You know you can, right? You can see light again."

My mother shook her head. "It is too late for me, child. Much too late."

Alia set a hand on mother's bowed shoulder. "It is never too late—"

A flash of light glinted off steel. Instinct kicked in. Alia's breath caught as I shoved her aside, sending her rolling.

Mother came down on my blade, her breath easing from her in a gentle sigh as the blade pierced between her ribs to stab into her heart. The blade that had incited my instincts to protect my mate fell from her hands, clattering against the rocky dirt.

I caught her as she fell, brushing the hair from her eyes as blood dribbled from her lips. "Why?" I whispered.

She lifted a feeble hand, sitting it on my cheek. "My wolf will not allow me to end my life. Now I may know…"

The light left her eyes. Her hand fell from my cheek.

"Peace," I finished for her.

Alia's gentle scent of rain and grief mixed with the scent of my tears as I cradled my mother to my chest with one arm and tried to stop the tears on the bridge of my nose with my other hand. It did nothing to ease the ache behind my eyes and the pain in my soul.

"She loved you. In her own, twisted way. But she never loved you in the way you needed. It's ok to grieve the person you needed and never had, and to grieve who she was."

With her gentle words and her warm arms wrapped around my shoulders as she kneeled beside me, I bowed my head over my mother's limp form and cried. I cried for the little girl who was so

broken. I cried for the woman who was so twisted. And I cried for the mother I needed but never had.

CHAPTER 49

Unwanted

ALIA

A horn sounded. Enforcers rushed inside, only to find a dead werewolf, Shen, and myself. Grandmother was out for blood. Shen's sister had disappeared.

"Shen…"

"We will bury her later. For now, we must find your grandmother."

I nodded. I gestured to Enforcer Markus. Anger curdled in my chest, but I pressed it back. I had to lead, and that meant putting the past behind me while being aware of all who could be my enemy within my ranks.

"Take her. Gently. Have the maidens wrap her in linen and prepared her for burial."

Markus bowed. Two of his enforcers came forward at his bidding. Shen glanced up at them, his eyes glossy but the tears dry. My heart ached for him as his *need* hit me with the strength of a battering ram. He *needed* his mother.

His arms tightened around his mother's body before he physically forced himself to release her.

"She was never going to be what I needed. But could I have been what she needed?" Shen asked as the enforcers walked away, his mother's body between them, her long hair flowing behind her.

The Reds were as prepared as we could be. We had gathered in the war room of the Matriarch's Palace, a place just off the throne room. There was a gloominess about the place despite fires roaring in hearths at either end of the room and lamplights above the massive table.

The elders spoke at length about the civilians and how they would know to escape through the underground passageways should the Reds fall.

"What about the magical creatures?" Elder Vera began. "Can we use them—"

Elder Timone interrupted her with a sad shake of his head. "It would be a swell idea, if not for the animosities which have only just begun to change. The common people have accepted the creatures, but the Reds have not. They killed the sphinx baby without qualm. It would be a mistake to let them join the battle when there is only a tenuous peace holding."

My mind went back to the way that Red had stabbed into the sphinx, effectively killing the little baby. I nodded my agreement. "It would be a mistake."

"But Matriarch, we have accepted you, accepted what you have done. Should we not use every resource available to us?" Elder Vera said, her eyes pleading with me to reconsider.

"This is not their fight. We have done them wrong long enough. Now they need to go."

"Matriarch." Elder Pulma sat forward. "Would they not fight for you? Fight for their home? Is this not what we are doing?" His eyes were calm, his face a little red, but that was the most sincere and straightforward I had ever seen Elder Pulma.

"I know. But I cannot—"

"Cannot or will not?" he asked.

I shook my head, unable to answer that simple question.

"The magical creatures will remain safer should we send them out of the city," Elder Timone said, his eyes hard and flinty even as he sent a gentle smile my way.

"Elder Timone is correct," I said. "We will not use the magical—"

A door crashed open, the wood pounding against the wall with a sharp clap. I turned, blade drawn, to find Brandt there, his face washed pale and his eyes wide with fear. "They outnumber us ten to one."

I sat back and stared, my mind not comprehending. Then I understood. This was truly going to be a losing battle, with or without the magical creatures. Even they couldn't help us turn such a massive tide that was against us. But I could give my people a chance to escape.

THE MAGICAL CREATURES within the tent stared at me. I had brought them all forward. I didn't know if some would understand me or not, but they had to be safe. They'd come to me for help, and they would leave before my war ended them.

"All of you have given me great honor by coming to me when you were in desperate need. But now, it's time you left to find homes of your own—"

A few of them shuffled their feet, their eyes wide. "You're kicking us out, ma'am?" the dryad asked, a tiny sapling growing from his green hair and leaves sprouting from his bark-like brown skin.

"Of course not. Were it up to me, you would never leave—"

"This is our home now. Let us stay, please."

Their *needs* beat against me. Many of them *needed* safety. They could no longer get that here.

"It is no longer safe for you here. First Brandt is a human you have seen many times; I trust him fully. He will take you away from the fighting so you can find your own homes and families."

Many of the creatures whined or shuffled their feet. The sphinx released a tiny cry that made the ground tremble.

"Then let us fight." This came from the elf who held tight to her mate.

I shook my head. "I cannot let you—"

"It's not a matter of letting us," said the dryad.

My lip trembled at what I was taking from them. But I had to. And I had to be honest with them. "My tribe would not fight beside you."

Is that your opinion or the truth? Ran asked, shouldering open the flap and stalking inside to stare down at me with her amber eyes narrowed into slits.

I ignored her question. I couldn't have more deaths on my conscience. Especially if my Reds decided to fight these magical creatures in the middle of battle—it would be disastrous. They had proven time and again that they would harm magical creatures even when I had shown them a different way. My tribe would fight and either win or die as we always had—as a tribe.

The magical creatures barely looked at me as they followed Brandt from the tent and into the city. My people were in the safe houses beneath the palace. I had sent a third of my Reds to them to ensure their safety as they evacuated. I was buying them time. That was all we could do.

My people—magical and otherwise—would be safe.

CHAPTER 50

A Soul That Bleeds

ALIA & SHEN

Alia

Shen came up beside me as he watched the magical creatures trudge through the city.

I turned and dust poofed as I smacked my face against his chest and wrapped my arms around him. “Are you ok?” I whispered.

His entire body shook as he released a sigh. “Not yet. But I will be.”

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

He leaned his head against my hair. His heartbeat raced against my ear. “Is it wrong to feel relief instead of pain, but to mourn everything that had made her as she was?” he asked at last.

I squeezed him tighter, and it was almost as if I felt his pain in that moment as I did with Ran. His soul cried. “Shen, only you know the years you spent with her. Only you know the pain—and sometimes the joy—you felt at her hand. You’re the only one who can grieve her as you can; no one can tell you how to do that. Not even yourself. You can only grieve.”

His shoulders trembled. I held him as he dealt with something that only he could handle. I could be there, but I couldn’t ease his pain.

“Thank you,” he whispered at last.

The knowledge that this could be the last night I had with him made me hug him tighter. “I don’t wanna see you die with us,” I whispered.

“You know I am not going anywhere, Little Red. So long as you let me, I will be by your side.”

“You should leave. We won’t win this battle.”

He leaned back, tipping my chin up with his finger. “Do you not know better by now?” He leaned down and kissed my forehead. “The only battle truly lost is the one surrendered before it has begun. Do not lose hope. Not yet.”

I plunked my face against his chest. “When did you become an optimist?”

His chuckle thawed a hint of my cold soul. “When my little ray of sunshine went behind a cloud.”

“Are you calling me a pessimist?” I mumbled against his tunic.

“Does a fenbutt smell?”

That startled a laugh from me. And I knew in that moment the one thing I wanted before the battle.

“No regrets,” I whispered.

His eyes were dull with pain but sharp with something I couldn’t name. An edge both wild and untamed, broken and ravaged. His nostrils flared as he sniffed the air.

His thumb gently traced the curve of my cheek, his hand coming to cradle the divot of where my chin met my neck, my pulse beneath his middle finger raging with a life all its own. “Are you certain? This is not a choice to make quickly, Carissimus,” he whispered, as if he'd read my very mind.

A smirk turned my lips. “I’ve known from the moment I shoved you over that cliff, you big hunk of werewolf.”

His lips twitched and his eyes shined with happiness. “You fell for me then?”

My smirk grew into a grin. “So what if I did? Tomorrow—”

His eyes darkened and gold rimmed them. “No talk of tomorrow. If this is what you want, then we will. But only if you should wish it. Not because war is coming. Not because you will regret it if not. But because *this* is the choice you desire.”

I stared at him, his eyes so serious, so gentle as they searched my face. I remembered all the things we'd been through. How he'd been my staunchest supporter even when it went against his very making. He'd allowed me to set the tone of our relationship even when his wolf craved more. I'd spoken with Doc who said most werewolves marked their fated mate the moment they met them. That Shen had waited and not killed every male in a five-mile radius was nothing short of a miracle, he'd said. Shen had protected me, even from himself. He was loyal, compassionate, and most of all, kind. He wasn't *good.* He was Shen. My Shen.

Behind the gentleness in his dark eyes, buried deep beneath what he attempted to show, was a fear that he wasn't good enough. That he was too dark.

Staring into those eyes, I saw it all. The fear. The pain. The sorrow. And the darkness. I covered his hand with my own, leaning into it. "I see you, Shen. And I'm not afraid."

His eyes shuttered. For a brief moment, the emotions within warred for dominance. A flicker of gold came forth, then vanished. His breath washed over my face; it was a bit stinky, but I wouldn't complain. Not now.

"You should be," he whispered. "I am not a good man."

A small smile crossed my lips. "I know. I've seen your darkness."

"Not all of it." His voice was nearly hoarse with the emotion he held back.

"No. But neither have you seen mine."

"You are light, Alia. A light that cannot be extinguished by the dark."

"No, Sheng-Li, my Alpha. I'm the star that burns bright because of your night sky."

His eyes popped open, his mouth dropping, no words coming forth.

"You are my mate, Shen. Source brought us together for a reason. But now… now I'm glad that it did. You've met my needs, helped me take down the walls I'd erected, and helped me understand how to light my own path. You protect and defend, but you also respect my wishes—both verbal and non-verbal. I want to

be your mate in soul and spirit and someday, after it's official, in body and mind. I need you for tomorrow and for all the battles we'll face. We'll be stronger… together, as one."

He leaned his head down until it rested against my forehead, as if his body could no longer support his weight alone. He wrapped his other hand around the back of my neck and breathed me in deeply. "This requires much from my werewolf. I will be unable to shift and will need time to recover."

"Then I'll watch over you until you're ready to battle again."

He pulled back, his eyes creasing with a smile. "I trust you, heart of my heart and star of my sky. Come."

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"We will have your dragon watch over you while you watch over me. We will travel to any place you wish, so long as it gives you time to think this through. You can always back out–" He choked on the words. He swallowed hard, his eyes twin glints of fire as he looked down at me. "You can rend the bond at any time, Alia. Ripping it from us now would be painful, but not terribly so. After the mating bond is in place, it will bring excruciating pain should you reject me." He halted, running a hand through his hair. "You need to think about this, Alia. Please. I do not wish to hurt you."

I stepped in front of him, lifting his chin and forcing him to look at me. "Just because your mother was a spineless coward for placing such a load on you doesn't mean you'll hurt me."

His eyes, shadowed with doubt and fear, met mine. But it was the self-loathing looming like a wraith within that made me suck in a breath.

"You will hurt me," I whispered, staring into those eyes made of fire and night. He jerked as if I'd hit him. "You will. And I will hurt you. Shen, there's no way around such things. But if we strive to be our best selves first, that's when we can stand together through the pain and overcome the trials. We're stronger together. You taught me that."

"I am not worthy. I am broken."

"I know," I said around the lump in my throat. "But so am I. Maybe together, we can be two broken pots that are together

forever.”

A tiny smile twitched on his lips. “Together…”

“Forever,” I repeated.

“I like the sound of that, Little Red.”

Ran alighted before us, regally folding her wings as she took in the two of us with a smirk. *Finally. Thought you two would forever deny the sickly scent of love you tried to hide behind animosity.*

I chuckled, kissing her nose when she brought it close enough.

I wanted it to be the waterfall, but I couldn’t risk leaving my tribe. Not right now.

But there wasn’t anywhere here I felt safe enough to be vulnerable.

“There is a cavern near your tribe. A place where anyone from here could come find us should something occur,” Shen said, watching what I assumed were my many thoughts flashing across my face.

I blinked at him. How'd he… You know what, it didn't matter. I gave a single nod.

Shen transformed. It took mere seconds for his wolven form to emerge from where a man had stood before. Lycus nuzzled his cold nose into my neck. I released a low laugh, catching his muzzle and kissing between his eyes. He almost went cross-eyed trying to watch me. “Hey, baby boy. It's good to see you too.”

His entire hind wiggled with giddiness, the ground shaking with his enthusiasm. He knelt before me, gesturing to his back with his head, his tongue hanging out as his entire body rattled with the force from his wagging tail.

Ran picked me up and sat me on him. I glared up at her. *Busybody.*

Better than a staller, she replied with a wink.

Shen slowly stood and turned to lick my foot. Then he looked me in the eye, waiting. “Let’s go,” I said, ruffling his silky mane with a smile.

With a low bark, he took off.

Riding through the trees with the moon high overhead was ethereal. Pools of water from recent rainfall became shimmering

mirrors dancing with moonlight. Leaves were pulled from the boughs by the wind as fall became more apparent with each passing day. Owls hooted, wolves called for their kin, and a unicorn bugled its cry from somewhere further in. I held my hands out to the sides and tipped my chin to the sky, closing my eyes and breathing in the sweet scent of peace.

Shen dashed a mere hundred feet from the edge of my tribe before a cave maw opened before us. Shen barked and bioluminescent moss lit up, shimmering with a gentle purple and blue and gold light. Each species of moss was a different color and twining in spirals on the walls were like living, glowing carpet.

He walked inside, his steps certain but languid as he turned his head so he could watch me gape at the glow.

A soft, consistent splash came from further within. The cavern was about the size of a large home, and on the far side was a sparkling pool of water.

Water spilled from an opening near the ceiling, glimmering in multi-colored streams. It almost seemed like the northern lights were in the water.

I slid down from Shen's back, running a hand over the walls and the luminescent moss that almost seemed to lean into my touch.

"I know this cave, Shen. And it was nothing like this," I said.

When I glanced back, Shen was standing there holding a cloak and a small blade. His hands were stark white where they gripped the sheath of the blade and kneaded the dark cloak.

"I—I had the dryad help when you asked the first time. I panicked… I wanted this to be special, to give you something memorable. Your sister helped me find your favorite colors, fashioned after the waterfall you… uhm…"

My arms wrapping around his waist and my face smacked into his chest, stopped his rambling. He made this. For me. "Thank you, Wolfie. It's beautiful."

Shen relaxed as he wrapped his arms around me, careful not to poke me with the sheathed blades. "Good," he said, such relief in his voice that I struggled to hold in a laugh.

"Wait. These… are for you," he said, his eyes crinkling with a nervous smile.

He held out the cloak and the blade. I took the blade first, easing it from the sheath to see a stiletto with swirls of dark and light metals. The handle was made of ray leather, which was easy to grip and didn't get too slick when bloody.

"Shen," I gasped.

"It is a twin for the blade you stole," he said with an ornery grin.

"But this one… it's blade heavy."

"I had the weight adjusted to what you prefer since you enjoy throwing knives so much," he said with a wink.

I choked on a laugh, remembering the time I skewered his cloak to the wall after diving over that cliff and nearly dying. "Shen… this is…" I had no words. He had taken note of what I preferred in blades. I hadn't even known it was possible to change the weight of blades. That had to have cost a fortune.

I grabbed the cloak, glancing up at him with a single brow raised. It seemed to just be a cloak…

"It is spelled. Put it beneath your Red hood and it will protect you," he explained. "Some things can still get through it with enough force, but it will help. It is also resistant to fire."

"Shen, this is too much. I didn't get you anything—"

He put a finger to my lips. "Alia, you are my gift for a lifetime. You are enough."

My bottom lip trembled. I had no words. And he seemed to understand that as he helped me put on the cloak and strap the stiletto to my hip, opposite its twin that still clung to my thigh.

"I wish I had my old cloak," I said, keeping busy straightening out the leathers around my new blade.

But when I glanced up…

My fingers reached out and touched the red fabric Shen held in his hands. I traced a mended rip in the fabric that matched the scar near my kidney. That wound had nearly taken my life after a mage's guard had gotten lucky years ago.

"You do now," Shen said, holding up the cloak. I realized then that the stitching of the rip had been made into a work of art. A

massive brown and green willow tree started at the base of the cloak and ended above the shoulders. And on either should were my bonds—a werewolf on one side and a dragon on the other. I could see my sister's love threaded in every stitch.

He helped me put it on and I smiled. The Red hood I had been wearing was nothing compared to this one. Holding it once more since it was torn felt like welcoming back an old friend. This fabric and I had seen so much together. It felt right to have it back now at the dawning of a new age.

"Are you ready?" he whispered, his deep voice sending a shiver down my spine. I nodded.

He leaned down, his lips brushing the curve of my neck where my shoulder met my neck. "The Mark of the Mate is typically placed here." I shivered at the feel of his warm breath over sensitive skin. "But this is your choice. Where would you like it?"

I slowly moved my hand, pointing to my bracer. He slowly knelt, his eyes never straying from mine as he carefully undid the underside of the bracer and slid it off my arm. My heart leapt to my throat, and I feared he knew exactly what he was doing to me. The butterflies fluttering in my stomach; the warmth growing in my chest. Then his eyes went down to my wrist. He growled, low and deep. A threat. And a promise.

The Mark of Dishonor was a red and burnt-orange painting on the underside of my wrist. He kissed it tenderly. His lips spurred a shiver to race down my spine. His eyes stayed on mine as his fangs grew and scraped against my wrist until pain, sharp but muffled, burned up my arm. A thrill went through me as something deeper—something ancient yet timeless—surged from the mark. It raced up my arm and paused around the walls of my heart. It lingered there, sniffing, then it settled in and waited. Waited for me to choose.

My lip trembled. I had never let anyone get so close. Ran was an exception because we were forced together, but this? I was *choosing* this.

As the ageless and delicate spirit of the wolf slowly coiled around my soul, I released my fears and let down my walls so I could just be.

Shen

HER SKIN CLOSED OVER AS SOON as I pulled back. It was the magic of the bond. Then a slow black speck began to grow where my teeth had marked. The black swirled, growing into the shape it would remain eternally. Every Mark of the Mate is unique to the specific couple.

Lycus was gone, leaving an oddly bereft part of me within. It felt as if part of my soul had departed. Technically, it had. He had gone to claim her.

I did not know what would happen when we mated. I had only known of werewolf-to-werewolf mates. What Alia and I would become would be something different. Something new. Something beautiful.

Alia's eyes slowly closed, and I felt a tug on the mate bond as Lycus slowly prowled around the edges of her soul. Ran was there, watching us from the areas where she guarded Alia's heart. Lycus was not *with* me, but he was still *part* of me. We could never be separated, not unless one of us so chose.

I felt him as he sat before Ran, as she studied him and probed into him.

He opened his soul to allow her to see every dark and broken deed in our past, to see how shattered we were and how we had healed. How we were forgiven but still struggling with our new life. How freedom had broken through what we were and how uncertain we were of what we would become.

Something about us must have been enough, for the massive, pearlescent dragon in Alia's soul bent her head down and touched her nose to Lycus' forehead.

I breathed out a sigh I had not realized I had been holding. Receiving Ran's approval was worse than speaking with Alia's father

—and yes, I had spoken with him before asking Alia, and it had been as nerve-wracking as it sounded. Who ever imagined a werewolf would ask a *Red* for permission to Mark his daughter?

Alia's face pinched as the black spread into a blanket of black on her wrist, covering the Mark of Dishonor. I wouldn't force her to expose her soul to me. Now that Ran had allowed Lycus through, now that she was faced with the truth, Alia had to choose. It was one thing to understand that I would know her very soul. It was another to allow me to *feel* it.

Alia gasped as she dropped the walls of her innermost being.

My eyes burned and my soul sang. Lycus howled as he gently placed himself where he could both protect, provide, and watch over this lovely soul who was ours to shelter and support.

Her pinched brow smoothed, and her chin fell to rest against her chest. Her eyes, so blue and so very bright, fluttered opened. Within, I saw the wildness. A hint of burning, molten silver.

As the mate bond snapped into place, fully accepted, a mark appeared on my wrist to match hers. It itched as it grew, the feeling almost like the crawling of ants on skin. Except, this was pleasant.

It would take a while for Lycus to return to me. Until such a time, I felt her. All of her.

From the way her hair always stayed up because it annoyed the heck out of her in both day-to-day life and in battle, to the way her worst fear was to be vulnerable. Yet it was also *more.* She felt so many *needs* on a daily basis that she could not imagine allowing someone to care for her. She knew what it took to give, and to place that burden upon another caused her soul such pain she avoided it at all costs. But instead of running from her fear, she embraced it, became it, *used* it. She used it to become the empathetic and graceful creature who met people where they were. Used it to guide bloodthirsty humans through a journey of redemption, to guide people from guilt to forgiveness, and to guide a lonely, aching werewolf to freedom and acceptance.

She took the broken, aching parts of her soul and used them to bind up others' wounds.

“Your soul bleeds,” I whispered, my voice breaking, my heart shattering, my very being fracturing and re-mending at what I saw behind the walls of her strength. When, for the first time, she let me *see* her.

She was every bit the glorious and beautiful creature I had anticipated would hide behind her walls. Of light and darkness. Of brokenness and mending. She was my starlight and my pathway home.

My Carissimus.

CHAPTER 51

The Broken But Whole

ALIA

Morning dawned sooner than any of us wished. With the rising of the sun, our enemy unfolded from the forest, slowly coming forward, their numbers designed to strike fear into the soul.

Half-man, half-beast rogues lined the forest edge, their lips peeled back to show pale teeth, many already dripping blood from their maws. Mages gathered behind them, some with balls of lightning and fire in their hands and others with eyes that glowed with an eerie power and massive, ugly vines teeming with purple bruises and red thorns snaking to them from the forest.

There were hundreds of both rogues and dark mages marching shoulder to shoulder, with more emerging behind them.

My Reds and enforcers were lined according to rank just outside the edges of the last buildings that marked the borders of the tribe. Years of peace had made the tribe complacent that there were no defensive walls in place, and that may yet be our downfall.

"What are they waiting for?" Elder Vera asked, her eyes on the wide array of beings on the other side of the clearing merely two hundred or so feet from us.

"They wish to put fear into you before the battle begins. A fearful army is a battle won," Shen said, his hood pulled up on his head and his eyes glowing golden in that darkness.

As badly as I hated admitting it, he was right. Worse than that admittance was the fear on my people's faces. They knew the

capabilities of these creatures. They knew what was in store. This was no empty threat.

We Reds were assassins not knights. We struck in the dead of night. We used time and predictability to our advantage. We attacked when a mage was depleted and under their curse. We killed when a werewolf was sick with wolfsbane.

We were no match for magic in a field where the opponent had every advantage.

"Surrender the puppy, Aurelia, and I will only kill you, your family, and the elders." That voice sounded familiar. Then I saw her. Dressed in gold with a leaflet of glorious golden Ambrose flowers upon her brow, my grandmother stood in all her glory on the far side of the plain. "Or, should my people turn back to my ways, I will consider sparing you all."

"You side with werewolves and black magic and spout lies. There is no surrender. Better to die knowing you did what was right than to live with the guilt of innocent blood," Elder Vera said, clenching her longsword in her fist as her blue eyes flashed with determination.

If my eyes pricked with emotion, I said nothing. I only gave the woman a tiny smile and a nod.

"We have much to atone for, little princess, but we will stand by you as we do so. Or we will die trying," Elder Pulma said.

The others beside us stood straighter at his words, as if they'd lit a fire beneath them.

"Speak, Little Red, let them hear your voice," Shen encouraged. My heart shivered in my chest at how I knew him and felt him. All of him.

From the way any hint of smoke made him cringe because of how many bodies he'd burned when covered in blood to the way his heart sang in its freedom and laughed in the face of him having *choices*. His darkness broiled like an angry maw of shattered dreams, but instead of it becoming his greatest weakness, he used it as his greatest strength. He conquered that darkness with forgiveness and gave his pain a place to be, a place to find freedom. His darkness was not the darkness of an abyss, but the soft velvet of a night sky—a backdrop to help others find their place to shine. But

when those stars were endangered, he was the raging blackness of the abyss, a terror to any who betrayed those he loved.

I turned back to the massive army four times the size of my own and every bit as skilled in war. Maybe moreso. "But… I don't know what to say. I'm just a girl. Why should they listen?"

His eyes softened. "Do you not know? You are of light and strength, bringing forth change wherever you tread. It is not your Gift which makes you special, it is *you* who makes the Gift you wield precious. *You* are the one who saved a unicorn-dragon, *you* are the one who freed a werewolf bound to his shame, *you* are the one who empowers the regular people to think outside of the fog of their knowledge and seek wisdom beyond what they have heard. *You* change lives not with your Gift, but with your kindness. Go, be the leader they *need*, and I will be there to support you when you come back, battle weary but victorious."

He winked, his eyes bright and free and alive. I reached up through the shadows of his hood and touched his face. He leaned into my touch with a tiny purr rumbling in his chest. "Thank you. Come."

He blinked open his eyes, raising a single brow. "Wha—"

I didn't let him finish. The mating mark sent a shiver up my spine, warming when my hand met his. I tugged him along.

I may be the matriarch of the Reds, but I was also mate to a stinkin' Alpha werewolf and bond to a dratted dragon. It was time to be seen for who I was, regardless of what people thought of me.

If my people rejected me because of that, then so be it.

Ran?

You've finally decided, have you, Two-Legs?

Are you certain they'll be ok?

You think silly two-legs will be the death of us after all we've survived?

This will open a bag we can't reseal.

Sometimes you need to open things before they spoil.

A grin spread across my face. She was right.

Then come. Let us show them why they shouldn't mess with our family.

A loud cry came from the woods. It was the cry of an eagle hungry for blood. It was the roar of a fierce and powerful lion staking a claim on their territory. It was the whoop of a sister coming to join her family, as at last I took my rightful place without fear of showing her and my mate off to *everyone.*

The rogues across the way, who were straining against their bonds, were now watching the sky and whimpering in terror.

My people took a collective step back as a lithe creature erupted from the trees beside us and burned the sky with her breath, painting it a flaming red and gold. Bones cracked and popped from beside me, then Lycus nudged me with his nose. I set my hand on his head, absentmindedly rubbing the itchy spot behind his ear that he couldn't reach as he patted his back foot on the ground. Over the bond, I could sense him and how different he was from Shen. Lycus was a puppy at heart. A dangerous puppy who was content when he merely had a full belly and someone to curl up with beside a fire. He didn't love death, but he could meet it better than any other warrior I'd known.

I loved him. The timeless being in my soul curled around me, a warmth growing over the bond I was just getting used to.

Ran stretched her wings out upon the flares of wind, her tail curling behind her and showing off every bit of her glorious form. She released a second cry as her flames dropped behind her, highlighting her pearlescent scales and massive, silver wings. She curled her body, shooting down from the sky with the speed of a hawk zoning in on its prey.

Ran was nothing if not dramatic.

With the grace of a gazelle but the power of an elephant, she landed by my side. I was flanked by an Alpha werewolf the size of a bear on my right and a dragon the size of an elephant on my left. I felt tiny.

Then a little pup scampered from the edge of the forest, screeching to a halt and ramming into Shen, who curled his tail around the pup. Fenbutt looked up at Shen with puppy worship and his tongue hanging out of his mouth.

What was he doing here? The pup was supposed to be with my family as they escaped through the hidden passageways. He released a pop that made Lycus gag.

"My people," I began. "We have long fought for a world of peace. A world where dangers did not abound around the corner. We fought for a place where innocents could rest. We bore that burden so the next generations would not have to go through what we did. What we did not understand was that in our zealousness, we turned our ire on those who were also innocent. We failed. But at heart, we were still trying to do what was right. We only fell astray.

"Now, we have a chance. A chance to change the future. A chance to take our choices into our own hands. A chance to look past what *was* to embrace what *is*. I will fight with my life to protect the innocents in this city and beyond. Will you, my people, my tribe, my very family, join me this day?"

A low beat began to build. My people pounded their fists to their chest in a steady salute. A commitment. A promise.

"My people!" I roared above the gaining beat that nearly drowned out my voice. "This day we fight! This day, we fight for humans, shifters, elves, and mages! This day, we take back the choices that were taken from us and we *choose*. This day, *this day* our lives become our own and we take back what was ours all along. *FREEDOM!*"

My shout was drowned out as the thumping was mixed with a steady chant.

"*Power ab intus, tutela omnium.*

"*Power ab intus, tutela omnium.*

"Power ab intus, tutela omnium."

Power from within, protection for all.

It was repeated. And then they changed.

"*Power ab intus, tutela omnium. Choices sunt potentiae quaeramus. Damnum potestate sui exitium honoris. Honor sui, honor arbitrium, honor Vita Fons, honor Auctorem, honor vita. Tutela omnium, fides tribui, vita magicis."*

"Tutela omnium, fides tribui, vita magicis."

"Tutela omnium, fides tribui, vita magicis."

I thumped my fist against my chest, raising my voice to match theirs. And if my eyes watered from the dust shaken from the earth by our voices, then the only ones who knew were an Alpha werewolf, a gassy puppy, and a unicorn-dragon.

I turned back to my grandmother. Her face was set in her stoney visage, her lips pursed in a thin line while disappointment was clear in her gray eyes. The sound of her voice didn't travel this far, but her eyes and mouth were easy to read.

"Kill them."

The rogues were released.

CHAPTER 52

Kingpin

ALIA

I pulled the blow gun from my bracer as Ran gathered the puppy gently in her paws to protect him.

Shen had foam flaking his muzzle. His lips were pulled back in a deathly smile. His eyes glowed golden and his claws curled into the ground. He lifted his mouth and a long, low howl echoed from his soul. I felt threads extend from him and track about, hitting other bonds within his entire pack. The thing that surprised me the most was the way those threads also came back to me.

Lycus turned his eyes to me. *We are one, Star of my Skies. What is mine is yours, and yours is mine.*

I couldn't melt in a puddle on the battlefield. Thankfully, before I gave into the urge to throw my arms around the powerful black werewolf, howls sounded from just outside the wood line.

Yips came from the woods and werewolves streamed from the trees in both werewolf and human forms. I smiled, petting Shen's head as Fen and Doc flanked us.

"Archers!" I yelled. I raised my hand. I waited until I could meet the eyes of the rogues before I dropped my hand. Arrows streamed past us.

An arrow thunked into my back hard enough to bruise. The cloak Shen gave me worked; it stopped the arrow from penetrating, but it sure as heck hurt and bruised my back right above my heart. Without Shen's cloak, that arrow would have killed me.

I turned my head. Elder Timone stood there, his fingers still upraised from releasing the arrow… at me.

My heart stopped. I'd trusted him. He'd been on my side the whole time. I shook off my thoughts.

Ten men and women stabbed the other Reds beside them. I threw a blade, barely stopping another death even as my Reds realized what was happening and rallied around each other, taking down two of the betrayers.

A third traitor Red came for me. I shot him with my blowgun and he fell at my feet, foaming at the mouth.

His face… Hatred burned in his eyes even as he breathed his last.

Verand.

Ran's murderer was dead.

Blue eyes met mine. Graham. He turned, paving a pathway through other Reds we had fought and bled alongside. What was wrong with him?

As betrayal carved a burning path through my soul, Shen and Ran remained by my side. But my Reds were hard-pressed to deal with the six remaining enemy Reds and the rogues coming ever closer. Shen's werewolves were rushing to meet the mages and rogues, but there were only about thirty or forty to their hundreds that streamed from the woods.

"Go!" I yelled.

Shen stared at me, his dark eyes narrow and glowing red beneath his hood. When did he shift forms?

Ack. Right now, don't know and don't care.

"Go. Save my people and keep them off us," I said, sending it along to both my bonds. A plea to protect my people, to help me.

Ran drew her head up as if appalled.

Shen bowed his head to express his trust in me. I nearly cried. He turned, taking down a rogue who was about to decapitate one of my Reds. Ran released a roar of displeasure, but went to meet the rogues behind me and unleashed her ire on them.

Elder Timone fingered another arrow. I blew a dart at him, but he ducked. It hit an enemy Red who was attacking Enforcer Markus.

"Why did you not just give her the Source-forsaken puppy? We could have lived peaceably, just as you wanted!" Elder Timone screamed over the howls and whimpers and roars behind us.

"Because I don't betray my so-called *friends*," I snapped back.

His face darkened. "She was right. You are too far gone. We had hoped perhaps your children would carry your legacy, but I realize now you would never allow that."

"Why do you want my bloodline so badly? Why do you want the puppy?"

His eyes grew darker, and I felt I was staring at a demon instead of an ordinary man. "Do you not realize? Your Gift is the epitome of perfection for rule. You know the needs of your people and how best to meet them. You can create a civilization that reaches beyond the stars and catches the very sun! We have searched for a bloodline that contains your very Gift for ages, and now you, the culmination of all our hopes, must die. Although, your bloodline lives on; your siblings and their children may just bring forth a better ruler for our needs."

"But why *my* Gift?"

"Did you not feel the power you got from the people? Have you not seen how creatures, big and small, are drawn to you? You could have ruled everything—become the first matriarch to rule the seven kingdoms, possibly the seven worlds. It would be a society founded on peace and linked to your Gift. All creatures would be cared for, all needs met." His eyes glowed with pride as his vision swelled before him. "The blasted hellhound was a means for you to connect to Source—directly. From there, you would no longer merely *feel* needs, but you could *manipulate* them. You could make people happy, give them what you want to give them, and the world would find *peace*."

I blinked at him, even as I sidestepped a rogue who nearly impaled me with his claws. Ran snapped the rogue up with her tail and sent his twitching body into a tree as she ate a rogue that had attacked Shen.

Shen pounced on a mage about to release a vine into my archers, who were continuously fielding shots. My Reds attacked in

groups of three to take down mages or rogues. I kept half an ear on the battle, even as I circled Elder Timone. I wanted to join my people, but understanding what was happening and why was more important. “What would’ve happened to the puppy?”

He shrugged. “The black mages would have disposed of the body, I am certain. And not only that, with him, we could transfer your Gift—”

A dart hit the side of his neck. He gurgled, his mouth filling with foam as he choked on his own saliva. He fell, twitching and staring at me in wide-eyed panic.

“You always spoke too much, old man,” Grandmother said in disappointment.

“And you never spoke enough, *Grandmother*,” I said, drawing two blades from my side. “All along, you only wanted me for my Gift?” Hurt colored my voice.

“Of course not, child. Should I have done as you had done in the trial, your blood would have spilt upon the sand that day."

As the meaning of her words raced through my brain, I froze. I was her most cherished—no. It couldn't be. I couldn't be the thing she wanted most. She never loved me.

She nodded as if whatever she saw on my face echoed what was on her mind. "You were to be my successor, *dear* child. My very legacy. You were to know all this upon taking my place. But you inherited your father’s blasted altruism. We could have saved the world with you; now we will just have to save it without you.”

I shook my head, and it broke me from my frozen stupor. “Don’t you realize how wrong this is? Manipulating people, killing innocent creatures—all for what? A chance to rule the world?”

She clicked her tongue as I drove a blade under the chin of a rogue. She watched the blood with the detached expression of one used to such carnage. “Have you not listened? We were going to create a world of peace. A world where everyone is content. Seventh on this planet. We could still create it. The peace you so desire—it can be yours.”

“Why try to kill magic? You have been using it all along!” I shouted, my face twisting in disgust.

Shaking her head, she ran a sword through the heart of an enforcer who had gotten too close. She moved away, and I darted forward, catching him as he fell, but his *need* cut off right as I reached him. I ground my teeth, watching my people fall and feeling helpless to stop them.

I threw a blade at my grandmother, but she dodged it. If I could keep her attention on myself, the others could fight. Maybe the scales would be tipped if I took her out.

"You are looking at a piece, not the whole. Magical creatures were only a means to an end. We needed to find your bloodline and get a hellhound. We could not have a tribe of protectors going around and thwarting us, now could we?"

It clicked. "You were never only the matriarch. You turned this entire tribe against magic so it wouldn't look deep enough to find the real *you*."

She grinned, her teeth white against the stark blood painting her face. "So you know, do you? Who am I, child?"

"You're Kingpin, leader of the black mages."

She threw her head back and laughed. "What a smart child you are." Her visage changed completely. Wrinkles disappeared to be replaced with smooth, porcelain skin. Her hair rippled, and beneath it was hair dark as a midnight sky and just as silky. She blinked and her eyes turned from pale gray to a striking blue.

She tossed her hair over her shoulder, baring her teeth in a sweet smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Finally. Do you know how hard it was to marry your grandfather? He had the bloodline, but as soon as my daughter was born, I realized it was much too diluted. She didn't even have a Gift, even though I was a strong mage born from generations of first-tier magic. Luckily, I found your father to marry your mother. I used a spell to ensure all your parent's children would be born with magic—at the cost of my original abilities, sadly. And your little puppy Alpha over there took care of your grandfather before I could—"

I darted forward, slicing. She dodged, but I kept coming. I nearly nicked her throat, but she blasted me back with a fireball. I patted my cloak out.

“Don’t speak of him,” I hissed, locking blades with her as she casually brought a blade from beneath her white cloak to protect her throat.

She raised a brow. “Oh? Why shouldn’t I? He was a passive man with zero drive.”

“He was a gentle man with a heart of gold who craved a simple life but married a power-hungry vagrant who needed to be put *down*.” I twisted my body and drove my blade handle-deep into her thigh.

She laughed maniacally. “You’re dealing with the matriarch who trained you and Kingpin who has magic. If you surrender now, I may leave your mate alive as a pet for my offspring.”

“You’re mad.”

She shrugged, kicking me back. “Madness to some looks like wisdom to others.”

While she was speaking, I drove a blade through her hand and when she was distracted by the knife sticking out of her, I sliced her throat. I stepped back, waiting for her to drop and bleed out on the soil where I’d grown up, where she’d trained me.

Long seconds I waited with guilt marring my soul, and she stood strong with a gaping throat like a third mouth. Her grin never wavered, and her skin knit itself back together. Horror threaded my soul.

“You can’t kill Kingpin. Kingpin is immortal. I would’ve passed this immortality to you, darling child, to pay for my sins. But now? I’m going to take what’s needed to ensure no one ever again experiences the pain of my childhood.”

"Why... Why turn on your entire tribe *now*? Why wait? You... you were my prisoner for weeks—"

I took another step back. I looked on in terror as everything I thought I knew collided with the truth. Everything fell to pieces before me. A part of me had still hoped that the grandmother I had loved could be in there somewhere. The one who’d smiled when I brought back a werewolf pelt. The one who’d given me my cloak at graduation. The one I’d wanted to make proud.

But it was clear, despite knowing her my entire life, I never *knew* grandmother.

Little things started to pop up. How she and Grandpa had always argued over how to treat us kids. How he'd stood up for us and told her not to talk about us like we didn't know what she was saying. How he'd said that a six-year-old was too young to train. He'd tried to protect us.

But he'd never known what he was up against.

"Dear child, one must always take the time to properly plan the destruction of your children's children," she said, sneering. "There were keys to set into place. And I had yet hoped the people themselves would turn back to their senses if I just gave them time to see what an inept leader you were. But *you*." The smile fell from her face as her blazing eyes locked on me. "You *turned* the people. It shouldn't have been possible. You were everything I waited generations for, and yet I never suspected the benevolence you would hold and how it would destroy centuries of work."

Fear. Cold, hard fear rushed over the bond between me and Shen. Panic.

Something cold slid between the chain-link and angled up beneath my cloak toward my heart. A massive black wave knocked me and the assassin behind me over.

I rolled, trying to gather my breath. I put my hand to my side that felt oddly numb. My hand came away red. Black spots danced before my eyes, but I saw Shen, his jaws poised over the black-haired woman who had been there when his mother died. She bared her teeth, staring him in the eyes.

"If it was not for *her*, mother would have never chosen you. She did not have to *die*!" she said.

Shen's sister just tried to kill me. Whelp, some things run in the family, I suppose.

Shen's mouth began to close, fangs penetrating the soft skin of his sister's throat.

"Shen," I whispered. "Don't. Your power is your freedom. Don't return to bondage."

Shen's eyes darted to mine. I *felt* him. His need for vengeance, for pain, for a way to numb the guilt growing like a seething mass in his chest. His fear that now, finally, I would see him for what he was.

A tiny smile tugged at my lips. *I do not fear you,* I whispered to that cold, detached mind that was trying not to feel.

His cold wall burst.

Emotions I couldn't read flickered across his eyes. Guilt flared, then he stepped back, grabbed his sister by the shoulder, and threw her into a tree hard enough to knock a normal person silly. She grunted and kicked his nose.

"You can't stop caring long enough to see the grand image. And you'll die for it. Bring me the hellhound," Kingpin said.

Blood seeped from the wound between my ribs. I stuffed it with cotton strips soaked in yarrow powder from a packet within my cloak. Mages circled me, and a black mage brought Fenbutt by the scruff. Fenbutt was snarling and trying to bite at the man, but the mage slapped him. Though I tried to get up, my legs were too weak to hold me.

I *felt* Shen's rage as his sister fought, preventing him from getting to me and Fenbutt. Other werewolves yelped as they were stopped by the mages, all trying to get to me. And failing.

I struggled to get at the mage holding the pup. "Don't you *dare* hurt him."

Kingpin tsked. "This all would've been different had you chosen another route, Aurelia."

That's when Fenbutt glanced up and saw me. His tail wagged and then it went rigid as his nose twitched. His lips lifted, showing hints of his tiny puppy teeth.

Then his eyes turned red. His body twisted and twitched. It morphed from a tiny puppy to a furry little goblin creature with a bowed spine near his neck and metal spikes all along his back. His fur turned a metallic gray and became as coarse as a metal brush.

The man holding him dropped him with a yell as a spike rose from Fenbutt's back and pierced the mage's hand.

Fenbutt bounded to me, licking my ear. He got on my chest and released a sound I had no words to describe. It was the scream of promised death. It was the sound of a hundred werewolves in one voice. It echoed and reached beyond the veil of this world and into something else entirely. I'd heard of these creatures.

I didn't learn of them as hellhounds, though.

We called them Timber Wolves, wolves that shake the earth with their howls and cause the trees to fall.

Fenbutt was a *Timber Wolf*?!?

"Fen, hon, can't *breathe*," I gasped.

He whimpered, jumped down beside me and licked my chin. He growled again at those around us, turning and snapping sharp teeth, trying to keep them all in his sight.

The mages stared at the little wolf.

"Is he supposed to transform so soon?" a mage asked.

Another mage answered, "No. It should be another year before he is able. But this only makes the spell more powerful. Get him—"

A white snout snapped over the mage and swallowed him in two gulps.

Doesn't the leather armor give you indigestion? I said to my dragon with a tiny, forced smile as she pulled back her lips to reveal red-flecked teeth and a leather bracer stuck between them.

For you, it's worth it. Now get up.

"Can't," I said.

A ball of lightning made my eyes water as it exploded into Ran, shoving her backward. Her shriek of rage made the leaves tremble, but a vine mage was already sending living, slithering vines around her legs too quickly for her to snap them.

Fenbutt latched onto an arm that came too close, clawing and shaking it rabidly. The man raised a blade.

"Don't kill it!" Kingpin screamed.

I tried to get up. I rolled until I was on my stomach, but someone pressed their foot against my back. A hoarse scream escaped my lips. It wasn't in pain but *rage.* "Going somewhere, little sacrifice?" said a voice that made my skin crawl.

A gasp and a splatter of something warm hit the back of my head. Then *he* was there.

Shen crouched in front of me, his eyes wide and wild. "Mate hurt," Lycus growled, his eyes dilated and so focused it was unnerving.

I knew he wouldn't hurt me, but Lycus was a boiling mass of dark emotion. I needed Shen. Shen was struggling to push his wolf back to get to me so he could assess the damage. But Lycus held to their body through sheer will, his shock making them freeze.

"Hi, baby. It's good to see you, but let Shen out now, ok?"

Lycus nodded, those eyes never leaving me. It was a promise that he would be there through it all, even if Shen held the reins. Then his face changed. His eyes flipped, and it was as if the wildness was slightly pushed back. I knew, however, that it was ever present, ever watching, ever waiting.

"Where?" Shen asked. I moved my hand. He followed the movement and shifted my cloak so he could see. He hissed through clenched teeth and his chest rumbled with a constant growl.

"Stay with me, Little Red."

He pressed his hand against the wound and suddenly the numbness twisted from absent pain to a raging, white-hot fire that tore a whimper from my throat. I wanted to scream, but didn't have the energy.

Sorrow, piercing, draining sorrow echoed across the bond.

"I am sorry, little one. I am so sorry. Come on, let us get you somewhere safe. Do you still have the mage stone?"

I pressed my hand against my chest. "Have to save… for others," I whispered.

"You idiotic, little… We are using it for *you* this time, understand? You will die without it."

"What about everyone… else?"

"We will do what we can for them. But I would sacrifice every person on this field for you. I would burn the world to see you live. Do not dare leave me here alone after I just found you."

I *felt* the darkness snapping up from its tethers. The horrors it would unleash to ensure my survival.

"Fine," I sighed, knowing what he said was true. Would hate for that to happen, so might as well let him save me so I can save the world.

Twisted logic. Sound, but twisted.

Says the one who just ate a mage.

I said it was sound, didn't I? she hissed, eating another mage and burping fire.

Shen found the mage stone and pressed against the teardrop on its smooth surface, making it release a light that blinded me for a few moments. The stone sent a warmth to the wound, slowly closing it and restoring most of my health.

But blackness was pulling at me, pushing me under. The last thing I saw was panic on Shen's face—pure, molten panic. Darkness drowned me.

CHAPTER 53

The Power of Love

ALIA

I was free. From pain. From fear. But something gripped my wrist and wouldn't let go. Light, almost in the shape of a hand, swirled around the mark on my wrist. It tugged me, but couldn't pull me back to what I assumed was the land of living.

Fight, Alia. Please, my love. You are not alone. I will fight with you onto death, Little Red. For where you go, I go. Should you not return— The voice cut off with a howl of pain. Lycus' pain was a brand into my chest, stealing my breath. *If you do not come back, I will come there for you. Nothing will separate us, not even death.*

Another bright light ran right to my heart, a string that wrapped around my chest, tethering me from drifting further into the peace I could feel awaiting me further in.

Don't you dare, Two-Legs. Don't. You. ***DARE****,* Ran roared into the black space around me.

A murky haze of blackness lurked in every corner. It was a blackness of alleviation from the pain.

And from the blackness, a figure emerged. He wasn't a man so much as a figure kind of like a man. His eyes were deeper than the hollowest pit, but more comforting than my mother's arms. His nose was nearly pert, and his cheekbones were sharp and commanding. His hair was a warm gold, which was so at odds with the darkness around us.

"Hello, Alia."

Were I able to be afraid in this place, his voice alone would've startled me. It was deep as an ocean pass and strong as a tsunami. "Who are you?" I whispered.

He bent down before me. A tender yet sad smile on his lips. "You know who I am," he said.

"The son," I whispered. Source's brother. We called him Torem Filius.

His eyes cradled me, made me feel safe despite the thoroughly sheathed power I felt in the majesty of his being.

How strange it felt for him to be so gentle when I knew he could snap my soul from existence with but a single thought.

Torem's lips twitched as if he'd heard my thoughts. "You have a choice, little star—"

I surged upright. "I know how these stories go. If you freakin' think I'm gonna go to Seventh and let my people languish—"

His chuckle cut me off. "You always knew your mind, little star. You just *needed* someone to remind you to trust it."

I gaped. "You… you sent him to me?"

"I gave you the right time and place. You both did the choosing. I would not take such a precious choice from you. But I had hoped, yes, that in the end, you would make each other stronger. It takes more than a strand to weave a bowstring, but the strongest weaves together three chords—and those cannot be broken."

Sadness threaded through my soul. "But I'm here."

"You are," he said.

My eyes burned, and I ducked my head.

He gently lifted my chin. "But you are also not." I blinked up at him, and he smiled. "There is more yet for you to accomplish, Daughter." His eyes took me in, starting at the blood still leaking from my back.

That was when I looked down. I jerked in surprise, turning my hands over. Bone-white scars crisscrossed my hands and arms and legs; it was almost as if I were held together by them. But that wasn't the worst. The blood slithering down my spine wasn't from the blade that had killed me. No, it was from the many *needs* that couldn't be met on a field of war.

And I remembered Shen's words. *Your soul bleeds.*

Torem's eyes were cleaved with sadness when I glanced back up. "Your Blessing. And your Curse." His words were both an apology and a boon.

"Why did you bring me here?"

The sadness faded from his eyes. "I heard the prayers of my people. A specific request from a nymph. She cried out to Source to provide for you, to protect you. I am here to provide in place of my sister as she does not have a physical form. Plus, you have one very adamant mate who has threatened multiple times to retrieve you from Seventh," he said, looking into the distance as if seeing something I couldn't.

I blinked. "He's threatening to kill you, isn't he?" I asked with a wince.

His chuckle was confirmation enough. I'm just glad the *son of the Creator* found my mate's death threats amusing and didn't seem to take them to heart.

"I know my people. And I know pain. There is much to be said of mercy where others would condemn." He gently turned over my broken and bleeding hand and… my hand healed. Where he touched, it healed.

"Can you… heal the rest of me?"

A tear dropped from his eye, a sprinkle of starlight in this dark world. "Yes, Daughter," he whispered, his voice broken with pain. "But first, you must give it to me."

My soul froze. He watched me, not pushing. What he was asking… I didn't know if I could give it.

"I'm scared," I whispered, looking away.

"I know," he replied simply.

He would let me choose. I had to release it. Release my walls that had protected me for so long. Release what made me, *me*.

"Your protection is keeping you from embracing the full extent of life."

"But what if I get hurt?" *Again,* I thought but didn't add. It broke me when I felt *needs.* It seemed like it also wounded my very soul. But it also made it to where I wanted to keep people out. Some

were slowly working their ways past my walls, but this… What he was asking…

"It is time to emerge from your growth, Daughter. The wall was there for a time to serve a purpose. For you to grow in strength and understanding while you were still growing your wings. But leave it for too long and it becomes a crux which stunts the continued growth you'll need to thrive."

I glanced up. His eyes were filled with tears. "It's time for you to *live*, Daughter."

I nodded, and in that moment, I let him in. Let him see *all.* From the broken creature who tried to please her grandmother and killed innocents, to the floundering healer who tried to heal her sister, and finally to the uncertain leader who tried to change everything in my tribe.

I let him in for it all. I surrendered my soul, my very being, to him.

He kissed my forehead, and a gentle sprinkle of starlight spread from his being, encasing me, holding me, soothing me. And when I looked down, the blood was gone, my skin was clean. But it was far from pretty. There were so many scars, so many burns, so many broken pieces. When I looked up at him, I was stunned by what I saw. There, on Torem's skin were wounds matching those that had caused my scars. Tears filled my eyes. He caught the first tear as it fell.

"You have everything you need, Daughter. Now go make them pay," he whispered, his eyes burning with vengeance.

I gaped at him. "I thought you'd be more…"

"More gentle and understanding? A pacifist, dearest one? I am all those things. But I am also so much more. Go now and know we will be with you, even unto the ends of the earth," he said, giving me a gentle shove.

I fell into light and swirling colors and broken dreams and joy and pain and everything in between. I fell into the mate bond, where Shen had a death grip on my soul. I was screaming, but I had no voice as I landed with a jolt back into my body. I opened my eyes

to Shen's pale face and his broken eyes staring at me as if I were a fever dream.

He cradled me to his body. "You are fine. You live," he exclaimed again and again. I threaded a hand through his hair as his nose was stuck in the crevice of my neck where he could feel and hear my pulse. His mind was wrought with fear and pain.

"I'm alive, Wolfie. I'm alive," I murmured, clutching him tight, my eyes still adjusting from that darkness to this world. To sunshine. To the pounding of my heart in my ears. To the harsh breaths of Shen as he alternated between growling and purring.

Shen didn't release me. He searched my body, but his hands only found smooth skin where a gaping knife wound used to be.

When the black spots cleared from my vision, I gaped. Surrounding us in battle were my enforcers, Shen's werewolves… and my *family*. Dad was fighting a mage with enhanced speed. Mom was battling a rogue, her mighty ax making quick work of dealing death. Anna was behind them, whispering the curses of the mages. She'd… she'd found her niche and purpose, but what the *heck* was she doing here?

"Anna, get your butt back to the safe house. NOW!" I ordered while getting up and stumbling on legs that didn't wish to function properly. The world tilted precariously.

Shen caught my arm, drawing me back into his chest and nuzzling his nose into my neck. I froze. "Easy, Little Red. Your… your heart stopped beating. The bond… it severed. I clung to it. To you," he huffed. "You… died."

"But I didn't. Now I gotta go win a war." That was crass and insensitive, but if I allowed myself to process everything, I would break. I had to be numb right now, even to his pain. "I'm sorry, Shen, but if I let you–"

He nodded his understanding, gently nuzzling my neck with his nose. "You will win, Carissimus, but let me hold you a moment. *Please*," he whimpered, his voice breaking on the last word. I felt his bone-deep *need* to hold me. To ensure for himself that I was actually alive. That the blood on his hands had not been my end.

Well, when he put it like that, I stopped fighting. I let him take my weight for just a moment as my body used the mage stone to finish healing what was broken.

I realized my body was trembling. My entire being was shaken by what had happened. I'd come so close to crossing that veil into Seventh. If not for Shen tethering me here, forcing me to use that stone, and the son having pity on me, I wouldn't be here.

For the first time in a very long time, I felt whole. As if, when the son healed my soul, he'd patched the many holes causing my soul to leak and dwindle.

I felt stronger and weaker all at once as I watched my people fight.

Dad grabbed Mom's arm and slung her like some sort of human slingshot. She released a battle yell and landed on a rogue's back, slitting its throat. She rode it down and rolled.

"I can see where you received your skills from," Shen said, his voice tinged with forced amusement.

"If I stay much longer, I'll break before this is done," I told him.

Shen heard, though. He always hears. Even those things I didn't say.

He nodded, kissing the side of my head. "Thank you," he said. "I'll be there when you break, Little Red. Now go *win* this."

As I emerged from the haven of Shen's arms, Jacob cropped up beside me, his hood falling in front of his eyes. He pushed it up with his forearm—the arm holding a sword—and adjusted his glasses with the other hand. He nearly sliced his own hood.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

He gave me a look. It was so much like Mom's no-nonsense glare that I nearly smiled.

"You truly think I'd letcha have all the fun?"

"Just don't die, or I'll bring you back to kill you again," I said.

"Ma'am, yes, ma'am," he said with a salute—nearly slicing his own arm—while I winced.

"*Never* call me ma'am again."

"Yes, ma'am," he said with a cheeky grin. He'd been hanging around Brandt too much.

I nearly groaned as I put my blow gun to my lips and took out a mage trying to creep up on Ran.

Jacob ran with a shrill battle yell. He tripped over his own feet, avoiding a slash of claws from the rogue he was fighting and nearly impaled himself.

I sighed, going to save him when Shen caught my arm. "Let him," he said.

I clenched my teeth and put a blade beneath Shen's chin. He smiled down at me, as if he saw me as a cute kitten instead of a tigress with claws. "I can't just stand back and watch my brother die —" I stopped as Jacob rose, taking off the rogue's hand before spinning and tripping again, barely righting himself before he kicked out. The rogue was pushed back a step. Jacob turned and ran. The beast roared and pursued my brother.

Jacob tripped… again. This time, he also dropped his sword. I nearly screamed at him as he knew *not* to drop his blade, but my words died in my throat as the sword hilt became caught between two rocks and stuck up behind my brother.

The rogue impaled itself. It snapped its foaming jaws even as the sword speared it through the heart. Then, the light went out of its eyes.

Jacob had his arms crossed, his hands extended before him as the dead rogue fell on him. He flicked it off, scrambling back and getting to his feet.

"Your brother also has a Gift. The Gift of Luck."

I stared at Jacob for a moment. Could that be true? Could all his clumsiness over the years… yep. It all made so much more sense.

When I turned, Anna was calling out to enforcers about a mage with plant powers who would pass out after using too much of their power. They pressed against the mage, arrows flying. The mage threw up vines to protect herself instead of sending them to snake out and trip our warriors. She fell to the ground, out cold.

Markus turned and nodded at Anna. She grinned, her eyes sparkling.

I didn't have time for tears. But they came anyway.

I stepped out of the circle of my enforcers. A collective cry rose above the din of battle and clash of swords as my people saw me, bloody and weary but alive.

Shen's presence beside me was a rock. I *felt* him take stock of our odds—they were not looking good.

The rogues kept coming, wave after wave, and my people were exhausted. Kingpin passed like a wraith between the Reds, her fingers causing chaos and her hands bringing death. She targeted my best warriors, taking them out one by one.

The tide was turning. My people were growing fatigued while the black mages and rogues were gaining strength from the scent of blood and death.

"Help them," I told Shen. He growled but left after one last lingering glance that said, "Do not get stabbed again or I will be angry and possibly destroy the world to save you." Or maybe he actually said that in my brain. Who's to know?

Shen was a thing of beauty. Every move was precise and purposeful. He was guarding a Red who was on the ground with a stab wound. Shen caught the forearm of a lightning-knife-wielding mage before the mage could finish the Red. He stepped back, manipulating the mage's arm to stab a rogue coming up behind the wounded Red while the Red, still holding their wound, fought a second mage. The rogue werewolf seized as the lightning-knife hit it.

Shen threw another blade, spun the dark mage so he was hit with rocks from a telekinetic mage, and clocked the lightning mage on the head with the hilt of a blade.

He went from place to place, taking on two or three mages and rogues almost at once and leaving them moaning or dead behind him.

As I glanced around and shot darts to protect my people, despair tried to eat at my newfound confidence.

The thorny briar of a vine wrapped around a group of my mages and Shen's werewolves who were fighting a group of rogues. With a massive snap, it slowly compacted, squeezing inward to kill my Reds and werewolves.

I watched as my people fell under the rising tide of teeth and claws and fire and acid and magic.

A vine trapped Ran’s leg and rogues crawled up her, their teeth and claws finding purchase and tearing scales from her as she roared in pain.

CHAPTER 54

Checkmate

ALIA

We had given it our all…

Rocks danced along the blood-soaked ground as a rhythmic thumping echoed across the battlefield. Unicorns burst from between the trees, their neighs merging with the screams as they rammed their horns into the chests of mages and rogues alike.

I heard another scream behind me and glanced back to see the hydra and sphinx working together to tear open the thorn bush slowly enclosing the team of Reds and werewolves. They emerged mostly unscathed from within, though the hydra and sphinx outside nearly scared the crap out of my Reds.

The dryad held out his hand from near our rear lines. A thin vine trailed through the field and wrapped around the thorny vine binding Ran to the earth. It squeezed and the large vine broke in half. Ran beat her wings, and when she was high enough, did a roll that sent every single rogue falling back to the earth with shrill whimpers.

The dryad's wife was clinging to his back, sending shields out to block attacks and protect my Reds.

Even little magical creatures darted about, biting and tripping the rogues and mages.

A smile slowly grew on my face.

Ran had called them. I'd been worried that it was too late, that they were too far away. But they'd come back for us. And the Reds fought alongside them without a second glance.

A tear dropped from my eye as I stabbed another rogue.

That was when I saw my grandmother. She had been watching all this unfold with a scowl on her pretty face. Her eyes met mine just as she released a red ball of flame. It crashed against Ran's chest while she was protecting Jacob from a mage who'd cloaked himself with invisibility.

Ran released a shrill scream as she stood still, taking the full brunt of the fireball to protect Jacob and my family who were behind her. She was thrown backward. Trees snapped like matchsticks against her weight. Her pained shriek sliced my soul.

"Stay away from my dragon!" I roared, running forward to meet my grandmother.

She was no longer my grandmother. I would call her what she was.

The soon to be *ex*-Kingpin.

Kingpin turned. So much about her had changed, from the wrinkled skin to the faded-with-age eyes. She was a smooth-skinned ice queen, her eyes as hard as twin glaciers. The pursed lips of disappointment were the same, as were the eyes that always found me wanting.

The threat of not measuring up still slipped into place in my soul, despite knowing there was no way for me to meet her expectations.

A rogue bounded past a Red not five feet in front of me. The Red turned, doing a backflip. I hissed. Only one person would use such idiotic moves on a battlefield. Brandt. He was fighting against a mage who sent rock shards flying against his hood.

I ducked the rogue's claws and sliced at her chest. It didn't phase her. She tried to take my head off while her chest was bleeding.

I angled my blade up and through her chin. Her *need* to be set free of this form drove my hand through the soft point of her jaw and angled it up to nick her brain. She fell as I pulled the blade, her *need* fading with a rush of something I could only call gratitude.

That was when I saw him. Dressed in that Red hood. Standing between me and my prey. My once-friend who betrayed us all and now fought for *her.*

"Graham," I said, my voice a low threat. "Don't you see what has happened? What's been done?"

Graham drew his favorite tiny blades. As kids, we'd complemented each other. I'd had my blow dart for range, Brandt had been stout enough for a broadsword. Graham was a sneaky bastard who would kill from behind. It was something we had practiced—my darts and Brandt's baiting—until whatever creature we were hunting didn't even know it was dead until Graham pulled out his stiletto.

Graham smiled. Those eyes of his were dark, nearly molten gray. "I serve my matriarch, Alia. She promised to save you. You don't see it now, but you aren't the Alia I grew up with. And it's all because of *them,*" he said, pointing to the creatures all around us. "You'll be free of them soon. I promise."

I shook my head, my heart aching in my chest. "Graham, people change. I just saw *them* for what they are: people, just like us. Creatures of Source who deserve our protection, not to be killed because of what they are. I serve the true Book of Codes, the one we should all follow. Don't you know me well enough by now?"

His stilettos dropped a hair. "What Book of Codes?"

A rogue tried to sneak up behind me. I ducked its claws, sliced its neck, and heard it gurgle. I watched the rogue fall, clutching its neck.

Could it be so simple? Did he not know about the book? But *how*? Then it hit me. I hadn't seen him after Grandmother had called him in for his testimony. We'd stuck him right in the dungeon right after. "Did you truly believe I wouldn't change everything without good reason? That the Reds would fight for me without a cause?"

"Lies," he hissed, hands clenching around his blade handles. His voice was uncertain, though.

"I'm not the liar here, and you know it—"

He pounced. I blocked the first blade, ducked the second, and ran my face right into his upturned knee with the help of his hand on the back of my head. I grabbed his knee and threw him to the ground as I blinked away stars from my eyes. My nose and forehead ached.

I swept his legs out from under him just as he gained his feet. But he jumped, dodging my leg. When he landed, his eyes widened at something behind me. I knew better than to fall for that.

He dropped the stilettos and ran at me. I tried to stab him, but he merely ducked beneath my blade and spun until he was staring at me with those blue eyes and a tight smile, his hands on my waist as if we were dancing. His body jerked as something rammed into him.

Those blue eyes hazed with fear and pain, his ever-messy blonde hair now streaked with red. His hands squeezed my waist as something sad and knowing overcame the both of us.

"I always loved you, you know," he said. Then he gave me a dopey smile. "Anyone ever told you how mighty slow you move, Miss Matriarch?"

His *need* struck me as if I were the one who was stabbed in the back. That was when I realized he'd taken a hit for me. A stone from the mage Brandt fought stuck from Graham's chest like an icy hand of death. It was coated in blood so dark it was nearly black.

Time froze as he grinned at me and I stood, not able to comprehend.

Graham crumbled in on himself when his legs gave out. I screamed, catching him with one arm. I blew on my blow dart with the other and sent the mage behind him spiraling into sleepy land. At the same time, Brandt dodged a flying rock and drove his blade through the mage's heart.

I cradled Graham in my arms even though he was one heck of a heavy son of a blade and had once betrayed me.

"Hey, stay with me," I begged, regretting having let Shen use the mage stone.

"It was… an honor…" He coughed and blood dribbled from his mouth.

Brandt came to a sliding halt beside us. Memories raced through my mind. It was us three against the world for years—studying together, killing together, laughing together. Brandt stared down at Graham with something in his eyes I'd never seen before. His smile was gone, almost as if it had never been. I turned back to Graham,

whose chest was heaving with pants, his lungs unable to get enough air.

"You are a warrior, through and through. It was an honor fighting beside you," I said, pushing blonde hair back from his sweaty forehead.

"I was... wrong, Alia. Forgive me. I was all wrong."

"Shhh, all's forgiven, Graham, ok? It's old news."

His smile didn't reach his eyes. "Don't… let the… matriarchy get to your head," he teased as a unicorn rammed into a rogue coming for us.

"I'll have you here to keep me from getting a big head," I said, a trembling smile parting my lips.

He smiled, his eyes lighting with sadness tinged with knowing; we both knew he wouldn't make it off this field of death.

"Keep her… humble," Graham said, looking over at Brandt. "Brother."

Brandt gave him a grave nod.

Graham's eyes glossed over as a sigh released from his lips.

Brandt and I sat in the middle of a battlefield in reverent silence.

I felt Shen check on me. His tendril over the bond was soothing, gently tugging, questioning.

I'm okay, I answered as if I were speaking with Ran. Somehow, I felt Shen's eyes on me, even as he fought a shadowshifter, a mage who could melt into shadows and emerge from any pool of shadow.

He turned his mind back to the fight, but I felt him. It was soothing just to know he was there. That he *felt* it. That he knew and mourned with me.

Brandt carefully removed Graham's Red hood and covered him with it.

I remembered the day he had each received that Hood—the day three eleven-year-old kids would become fast friends and would help each other survive over the coming years.

Now, it would be handed to his sister and mother as a testament to his service. A paltry exchange for a priceless life.

Graham had lost his way, but in the end, he was a man who'd tried to make amends for his mistakes.

"Go, Matriarch. End this. For us all," Brandt said at last, looking me dead in the eye. His face was devoid of the mischief I had become accustomed to.

I understood why he wore humor as his armor. He was a serious soul who loved deeply but sometimes didn't know how to show it. And right then, the pain etching each surface of his face was a strike to my gut.

I gave Brandt a salute and then bowed to the body that no longer housed my friend's soul.

I rose to my feet, slicing a rogue's throat when it got too close.

I was *done.*

"Fenbutt!"

He bounded from across the field, his footsteps shaking the earth even though he was but a fifty-pound little goblin.

"*I need you,"* I sent out.

The things Kingpin said were running through my mind. She'd mentioned that when I stole Fenbutt's power, I'd be able to influence needs.

Could I do so with his permission?

Kingpin stared at us from across the bloody battlefield filled with screaming, writhing souls… and she grinned. It was the slow grin of predator to prey. The show of teeth that signaled hierarchy.

She had trained me. She had raised me. She had used me.

It was time to use what I knew against her.

Words resurfaced in my mind, the words the nymph had said so long ago.

When you need it most, what you need will be provided.

But what I never realized was that I had all I *needed* all along. I was born for this.

Fenbutt nudged my hand at the same time as something nudged the walls around my soul with a feeling of both softness like fur and a hardness which reminded me of Fenbutt's second form. It didn't hurt, but I realized Fenbutt could have barreled through my wall with ease, and yet he merely asked for it to drop. It amazed me to realize he was a creature who had a connection to both this realm and the spiritual realm.

In order to allow him to connect with me, I would have to drop my walls entirely instead of merely opening a door to allow a few in. The pounding of *needs* and daggers of pain trying to pincushion me would penetrate my very being. I would have to allow them to touch my soul, and shred it.

I had to accept what I was and what I was made for.

But I didn't want to. Allowing Shen and Torem Filius to touch my soul was enough. This would be something else entirely. This would—

We are with you, Two-Legs, Ran said, roaring behind me with a throaty call that warned of death.

You are not alone, Alia, Shen said, his voice soft.

Your soul is mine, Daughter. The son's gentle starlight surrounded me, and I felt my soul slowly heal despite the slices and battering it was taking from the unmet *needs* around us getting *through* my still upraised wall.

He was with me. And I realized Source and Torem Filius had been preparing me for this moment all along.

For the first time in my entire life, I let my walls fall from around my soul.

The *needs* drove me to my knees.

There were so many. So, so many.

Daggers, pounding fists, slicing needles, and everything in between. The pain was unbearable. It shook my being until I didn't even have a voice to scream.

Then Shen and Ran were suddenly *there.* They surrounded my soul and took some of the pain so I could bear it. And Torem Filius touched us, healing us as soon as the *needs* came and taking the pain on himself.

That was when I saw it. Beneath the *needs.* Beneath the very souls around me, there was the burden. Why the *needs* were there.

Tears pricked my eyes. Their souls were broken. They were meant to hold precious memories filled with love and joy and understanding. But instead, the vessels were shattered with harsh words, punishment, abuse, and lost dreams. And those memories affected the *needs* bursting from the surrounding souls. How those

around them provided those needs left them a spring able to provide for other *needs*, or they didn't and were left with large holes where a wellspring should be. They tried to fill those broken chalices with faux love, expectations, addictions, and everything in between—and yet were left so very empty.

Some had been crushed during childhood by imperfect parents who couldn't fill their chalices and only gave what they had—brokenness. Others had been loved deeply by parents only to be broken later by the betrayal of loved ones who'd used them and spat them out.

But then I saw something beautiful.

Shen's soul.

It had been shredded in childhood by his mother and later by many betrayals in his life. Although it was scarred, it was *healing.* He had found himself and accepted himself. His chalice had threads of gold and pieces of starlight holding his glass together where there once were gaping holes.

Not one person on this field was left unscathed by *needs* that were long since unmet and had broken them. But there were many who—like Shen—were finding healing in their own ways. They were filtering and spreading into those around them, their souls reaching out with a tender touch, a kind word, or even a sacrifice of taking the blade for another on the field of battle. They knew what it was to be broken, and without even realizing it, they tried to spread healing to those around them.

In that moment, I realized the broken one's *needs* couldn't touch what was healed.

And I realized I had it all backwards. For so long, I had tried to protect myself by keeping everyone out. I had thought it was safer. It made me strong, right? But no. It merely hurt the relationships I held.

In healing, you didn't need walls to keep others out. You needed to heal so that you could handle what the walls kept at bay.

The daggers of pain and needles of discomfort slowly morphed. I saw them differently, saw them as things which could give me insight. I would no longer allow them to hurt me.

And in that moment, I *felt* them all differently.
Including Kingpin's.
I glanced at my grandmother, whose smile faltered.

CHAPTER 55

You Cannot Save All

ALIA

Kingpin took a step back as Fenbutt and I stepped forward, together, as if we were one entity.

Something odd flickered in her eyes.

Fear.

Off to the sides, the battle raged. Mom and Dad and my siblings were taking on two mages who were throwing acid at my archers who were picking off rogues with blasted good eye shots.

The hydra and sphinx were working together with my Reds to take down a group of fire-wielding mages. A Red stepped in front of the mother sphinx, taking the flame meant for the mother. The sphinx stared down at the human as the *need* erupted in my soul and then vanished as if it had never been.

My heart cried even though my eyes could not.

I knew her name. I knew each and every one of their names. I'd grown up with them. I'd trained with them. They were good people. A bit disillusioned from what we'd been taught, but good people.

Graham. Sera. And so many more. Names that would be branded onto my soul for eternity.

Ran, Shen—I need you, I called out to my bonds.

Shen materialized at my side, grabbing an arrow from thin air an inch from my eye. I didn't flinch. I didn't know if my nervous system was just that shot or I was just bordering on psychotic.

"What can I do, my Luna?"

"Stop her from murdering my people," I growled, pointing to Kingpin while another Red dropped from her blade and crumpled on the blood-drenched ground.

Shen bowed his head and then stabbed a mage who materialized behind him using some sort of speed or shadow magic. The mage collapsed as Shen turned, eyeing Kingpin who was harming the people she'd claimed to love.

"Best way?" he asked. The bond was a cold, calculated thing at that moment. As if he wouldn't allow himself the luxury of emotions. For right then, he was Sicario Hood.

"Ran can take the flames, use her as cover and make my grandmother pay," I said. "You'll know when it's time."

Shen raised a single brow but nodded. "Do not get killed," he said, his dark eyes filled with caution.

I grinned. "Me? Never."

He huffed, but amusement flared over the bond along with a joyous affection that wanted to take me in his arms and squeeze me until I couldn't breathe. It reminded me of when I see a furry baby animal and want to squeeze it. He found me *cute…* like some sort of furry rabbit or baby critter? "Hence why I am concerned."

I am a lion who could kill you! I hissed at the bond.

Sure you can, princess, he whispered back, low and husky.

Ungracious, backward cur! I shouted.

He was gone the next moment, only a puff of air to signal his leaving. He dove into killing, trailing a pathway of blood behind him. Again. Until he made it to Kingpin.

With a single kick, he knocked her back and sent her spinning across the ground like a skipping stone on water. She left a divot of dirt five feet long when she slid to a stop.

That power. Shen looked back at me and grinned. And in his face, I saw darkness that made my soul tremble. Not with fear but anticipation.

He again drove her into the ground, keeping her occupied until she grew angry enough to send a swathe of crackling fire after him. He did his little *move* again and it barely missed singeing his arm.

Since Shen wasn't on mage duty, my people and my magical creatures were taking the brunt of the dark mages power. "Hold, just a little longer, please," I whispered to my people even though they couldn't hear me.

Ran squashed a rogue under her foot and ripped its head off with her teeth.

I sensed her in a way I never could before. She longed to return to her people but didn't wish to leave me. She needed to bask in a hoard for a while to completely regain her strength. This was her at *less* than full strength? I'd never want to be *her* enemy.

She snorted a laugh in my head.

Am I not terrifying enough now*?* came her innocent voice as she roared at Kingpin, taking a hit of flames to protect the injured Red at her feet.

Shen got the Red—was that *Brandt?*—to safety and sliced the back of Kingpin's ankles, severing the Achilles tendon and making her stumble. She turned with a snarl on her face, but Shen and the Red were gone. Before she chased another Red, Ran tossed her into a tree with a simple swipe of her claws.

"You ready?" I said to Fenbutt.

He gave a little woof, wagging his tail.

"Do it," a voice said from behind me.

I turned to see Mom standing there, her eyes bright with tears as she watched her very mother kill, maim, and destroy her friends and family. Mom's jaw was clenched in determination, and ire bounced behind her calm facade. Behind Mom were my siblings.

Jacob saluted me. "At your service, ma'am," he said with a jaunty grin.

Anna smacked the back of his head. He rubbed it, shooting her a glare.

Dad finished off a rogue and came to stand beside Mom. "We trust you."

I nodded. "I won't be able to fight."

"Then it's time someone protected you for a change, little sis," Anna said with a gentle, knowing smile. "Let us do for you what you've done for us."

My lips quavered. I turned before they could see what their support brought me. How I *needed* it.

"I trust you guys," I said, deciding to let them see my tears.

Mom gathered me to her bosom, as if knowing just how much I *needed* that.

"Enforcers! Rally around your matriarch!" Dad yelled, and those nearest to us finished their battles and gathered around us, fighting back the hordes of rogues which just kept coming like a massive tsunami.

Not only that, but unicorns gathered around us as well, stabbing anything within reach of their horns with unerring accuracy. The sphinx used her nose-like beak to protect Enforcer Markus as a rogue pushed him to his back. He nodded at the sphinx before diving after another rogue.

The dryad and elf couple were behind us. The elf used force fields to bash mages and then the dryad used his vines to tie them up or kill them. I saw the bald shopkeeper who always wrung his hat in his hands with a plank of wood, his face coated in blood as he swung at a rogue, taking it down with his fellow villagers.

When the heck did the *villagers* join the fight?

My heart thudded with affection so deep it warmed my soul.

My people and those we saved were coming together… for me. For us. For our freedom.

Determination burned in my soul. I wouldn't let them down.

"Sometimes strength is knowing when to let others help you, honey bunny. I love you. Now kick your grandmother's hinny." Mom kissed my forehead, stepping back as I pulled away.

Dad gave me a nod that was pure respect and pride. Jacob saluted—and called me ma'am—*again*. And Anna gave me a glowing smile that made my heart leap with joy. She looked radiant.

I sat, my family surrounding me and my enforcers and my magical creatures surrounding them. I laid my hand on Fenbutt's forehead and he scrambled into my lap, his soul linking with mine. I cuddled him close as I dove into the realm between worlds.

I fell into a well of darkness, surrounded on every side by *needs* screaming for help. By my side was a snarling puppy who darted off

into the fog.

"Fenbutt!" I cried, but he was already gone.

An unfamiliar darkness surged. It was a blackness that darted from person to person, killing, reaping, destroying. It was darker than the darkness itself, a black hole of emptiness instead of a soothing peace.

It was not meant to be here. It felt *wrong.*

The mages themselves who wielded the emptiness had *needs* buried beneath their desires, but their choices had left them numb to those *needs* and vulnerable to manipulation.

Ahhanhi, I whispered. *Forgive me, but I do call upon your promise.*

A blue-haired, amber-skinned being with hieroglyphs all along her forehead appeared before me in this alternate reality of the real world. Was this the spiritual realm? I would likely never know.

Hello, little human. How may I serve?

Can you set them free? I asked, gesturing to the mages with the black so deep it coiled like a serpent in their souls.

Ahhanhi turned to the enslaved souls who didn't even realize they were bound, and I could nearly see through her head. She turned back to me with a gentle smile. *I knew my promise would not go in vain in you, little human. This will be my pleasure.*

She turned. One moment she was floating before me and then she was by souls of differing colors, their very beings surrounded by an emptiness feeding on their *needs* and whispering to their wants.

The emptiness screamed as she ripped it from the mages. Some reached for it and got it back in the moments before it disappeared, and Ahhanhi frowned in displeasure but let them have it back. Others cowered away from it, their souls free for the first time in many years and clarity making tears roll down their face. Funny how darkness can be so alluring yet so very foggy when bound to it.

If the mage did not want the emptiness back, it had to flee. And it flew to one person. This person had a storm of black emptiness around them, their very essence hidden behind the forces not of this world. The stormy blackness was an inky abyss that crackled with spikes of electricity.

But I wasn't looking for the emptiness. I was looking for the person beneath it.

The emptiness howled at me as I parted it, diving into the abyss of my grandmother's soul as Ahhanhi ripped more emptiness away to free mages.

And there, in the very center, beneath years of toil and unmet needs and downright abuse… was a child in chains. A child burdened with weight much too large for her little shoulders to carry. Her head was bowed, unable to lift under the pressure of the chain about her neck.

The chain read 'Hopelessness.'

The emptiness tugged at me with prying claws, ripping into my soul, but I dug and I pushed and I, at last, fell to my knees before the girl.

She lifted her head just a hair, and I saw bright blue eyes wracked with pain and guilt. Her face was smooth but pale, and blood dribbled from her mouth in a steady tap-tap-tap against the chains binding her feet.

"You are not to be here," she said, her voice wispy but clear.

"I know. But I've come to set you free."

She bowed her head again. "Freedom is in the eye of the beholder. I chose freedom in power, and it bound me. I chose freedom in love, and it nearly killed me. Freedom is not what it is supposed to be."

"Then I haven't come to free you. I've come to love you," I whispered.

I saw the path she took to get to this place. I saw the things that forced her into the bondage of searching for power enough to control the world so it would be peaceful and beautiful for all. Somewhere along the way, she lost her way and made a few decisions which paved a pathway to darkness that made her give up herself in the hopes of never feeling pain again.

But here, at her core, she was bound by those things she thought would bring freedom.

I pulled dark fingers of emptiness from around my neck and leaned forward, wrapping my arms around this broken woman who

was once an innocent girl. This woman who perpetuated the cycle, breaking others in a bid for power. On and on, until she was a slave to the very things she'd committed to fight.

In fighting monsters, she had become one.

I wrapped my arms around her, chains and all, and I gave her the love I'd given myself. Some things weren't about what had broken you, but about what healed you. When I had chosen to be there for myself, to be kind to myself, and to work on myself, it had healed parts of me I didn't know existed.

People will be people. People will dislike you, blame you, hurt you. But what you think of yourself hurts you the very most—or heals you. And every creature of the five worlds was blessed with a soul, endowed with Gifts from the Creator, and connected to Source by the sacrifice of the son.

They were beautifully imperfect and lovely creatures. Every single one of them. But sometimes in their brokenness, they made choices that led them down a path they never wanted and then felt too stuck to change.

But that was the thing. No one was ever too far gone. No one was ever beyond the ability to recover. No one was ever too broken to heal.

We were all a little—or a lot—broken.

And that was ok.

We never have to be stuck. There was ever a pathway free. And we were never too broken. *Never.*

The being I was holding reached up a hand and grasped my neck. "You can be loved," I whispered.

"I do not deserve love. Not anymore. But I can do the one thing we *need*." The child morphed. She took on a visage of wrinkles and gray hair. The chains fell away. She rose with my spiritual throat in her hand. "I can take it. To make everything we did right. To make it worth it."

"Grandmother—don't," I choked out, a tear trailing down my cheek as I felt her intent. She was too broken to hold my Gif—

She smiled at me. It was a gentle thing, tempered by love. "I was ever proud of you, my girl. But you were too altruistic to be

used as I needed."

"Don't," I whispered, unable to voice anything further as her hand tightened around my throat.

She set her hand over my soul and pulled. She ripped something precious from me, a part of me I had never realized was even there. The pain wrenched a scream from my lips.

She dropped me and I fell to my knees, clutching my chest. I was trapped. With no Gift and no way out, my soul was at her mercy.

She watched as I slowly withered in her mind, the emptiness clawing and pawing and slicing. The wounds Torem Filius had healed were reopened, my soul bleeding as the darkness of my grandmother swarmed my innermost being. I screamed.

A howl echoed in the dark. A roar of pain and fury. The mark on my wrist glowed. My wrist, which had once borne the Mark of Dishonor, was now a seething mass of swirling darkness. Darkness that even this emptiness couldn't conquer.

The darkness on my wrist was the purple-blue hue of a night sky. It was shaped like a hemisphere with rain falling from a cloudless night sky over a teeming valley of mountains and rivers. If you looked close enough, you could see a werewolf howling up at the moon. On one side, there was the top of a willow tree and the other where roots branching up into the sky.

"Mate?" Kingpin hissed. "No, you are not his. You are my granddaughter, mine to kill."

No, a voice boomed into the echoing caverns of Kingpin's dark soul. A streaming light emerged from the mark at my wrist, coalescing into a werewolf with glowing red eyes and all-white fur—a complete inverse of his physical form. The heart on his hindquarters was black, as was his tail tipped in black.

*She is **mine**,* Shen and Lycus growled as one, their voices a promise, a certainty, a declaration.

The werewolf launched at Kingpin, knocking her back to the chains at her feet.

Something tugged at me from within. I touched my glowing wrist where I saw a living tether of black and blue and gold entwined.

Shen used it like a rope, tugging me, pulling me, and with a pop, the emptiness lost its hold on me. The last thing I saw was the wolf winking at me before he faded into bright mist and followed me out of the caverns of death.

I was ejected from Kingpin's being. It felt as if I'd been riding Ran backward in a downward spiral, and we landed *hard* on a rock. But the metaphorical rock was my physical body, so I didn't die.

It just *hurt.*

I plopped back into the physical world with a jolt. My mouth felt dry and my tongue clung to the roof of my mouth. My arms shook as I sat upright.

Shen was beside me, handing me a water canteen. I took it and he helped me ease it to my lips. His concern shone through both the bond and his eyes, but he held back the questions as I recovered, my arms and legs feeling odd. As if they weren't my own. As if my soul were still left tethered to that monster.

Something felt like it was… missing.

"What did you do?" Mom whispered, staring in front of her.

I peeked around Dad and saw Kingpin. She was glowing with an inner light. One hand was glowing with a ball of starlight, and the other was wreathed in swirling darkness.

She smiled, half her face wreathed in light from my Gift and the other half shadowed like some sort of demon. Her eyes were reversed, one light and one dark, but they swirled with either darkness or light depending on the base. She laughed, her voice two in one.

"I am free at last!" she said, tilting her head back to the skies.

But then her smile dropped.

"What… no, *NO*!" she screamed, backing away and swatting in front of her as if something were assaulting her. She beat against her chest, tearing at it with her claws. Her eyes met mine and they darkened.

I stood, walking the ten feet to her as she fell to her knees. "What is this?" she whimpered.

"A Gift. And a Curse," I said, staring down at her. I then glanced around.

The battle was done. Most of the mages Ahhanhi had freed of the darkness had fled, those who remained in darkness had been slain.

The rogues who hadn't been killed had run off, their appetites for carnage satiated in both friend and foe. I would need to hunt them down and release them in the coming days.

But for now, I stood before the woman who had trained me and betrayed me. How she clung to the empty blackness as if it were her very child. She couldn't release it to embrace the light.

Then I understood.

Anyone can heal, but they have to choose it for themselves. And you first had to be humble enough to admit you were broken.

Grandmother was trying to cling to the Gift she stole from me while holding to the darkness inside her.

And I finally knew my Gift's Curse.

It was brokenness.

Seeing other people's needs left you broken. Aching. Filled with sorrow.

The *needs* of the people all around her were stabbing into her soul. I knew because I'd felt it. But I'd had years to learn how to put up boundaries around my soul so the *needs* didn't shred me to pieces. Many still got through to shred my soul. To make me a scared, broken creature within. A creature I loved. A soul that had borne other people's pains and helped them through it. That had mourned those we lost, rejoiced with those who healed, and brought justice to those who harmed.

I loved her, that broken, scared, imperfect soul within me.

Shen took my hand and kissed my wrist where his mark lay beneath my bracer. *So do I,* he whispered in my mind, his eyes intense with the depth of his loyalty and his love.

I peeled my eyes from his and looked back to Kingpin, who was being shredded by the one thing she'd coveted.

It was worse because as a ruler, you knew the *needs* of everyone in your kingdom. And though my kingdom was small, it still consisted of many thousands of people and creatures. And she didn't have a Ran who could help bear the load, or a Creator who would

heal her, or a family who would bring her food and sit with her, or a werewolf who would make her laugh until she could cry.

Kingpin didn't have what she *needed* in order to bear my Gift since it was meant for me and no other. And it was slowly destroying her.

Some people you can't free because they don't want to be free. Some people you can't help because they don't want to be helped, Ran said, watching from behind us. She tucked her wings against her sides as she squashed a rogue trying to sneak up on my little ragtag group.

Fenbutt stalked beside us, still in his little goblin form. His low growl shook the ground at our feet.

Kingpin was shriveling. Her face was becoming sunken, her hair falling out, and her fingers becoming bony and thin. Even so, she maintained a death grip on the Gift that was killing her.

Fenbutt launched himself forward and—I looked away. I didn't wish to see my grandmother slain. Not like this.

Fenbutt nudged my hand. I opened it and something warm and soft fell into my fingers. My Gift. I put it to my chest, and it felt as if a bolt of lightning went through me. I breathed out a sigh of relief. My Gift was returned to me. For a split second, I again felt all the *needs* of those around and why those *needs* were there and then Fenbutt pulled back, releasing me from *knowing* the depth of those *needs*. They still teased at the corners of my mind and still tried to harm me, but they glanced off my soul.

For the first time in my entire life, feeling *needs* no longer hurt.

Shen put his arms around my shoulders as my people, my Reds, and my magical creatures stood alongside his werewolves; all of us were bloody, torn, and weary, but victorious over the evil that had come for us all.

CHAPTER 56

Redemption

ALIA & SHEN

Alia

It took days to clear the area and put to rest all those who had died.

Graham had died along with thirty brave Reds who had stuck by my side and battled their old mistress and countless more magical creatures, those who had come to me with *needs* and then came to our rescue when we needed them most.

We mourned. But we would rebuild.

I stood in front of my entire city on the outskirts of where the battle had been held four days ago. My Reds were fully decked out in their cloaks, polished to shimmer in the moonlight. All the villagers were present as well, people who weren't warriors but had turned out to support with bringing food, hugs, care, and whatever else we needed. Today, not everyone wore the Red Cloak, but everyone wore red, from a scarf to a tunic to bright headdresses.

Even the unicorns and the magical creatures had somehow learned of this tradition, wearing ribbons in their manes while the other creatures had aprons, hats, literally anything red. I had a feeling Shen had had something to do with that.

The red worn by all was a final tribute to the blood spilt that day. To the sacrifices made.

“They’re waiting for you, hon,” Mom said, patting my cloak and making sure there were no wrinkles or dirt, her callouses sometimes catching on the thread of the willow tree.

Shen stood behind my family, his eyes sad yet filled with joy. Over the bond, I felt a strange sense of both contentment and bereavement. As if he didn’t know what to do with himself.

His scowl was still in place as he glared at anyone who got too close to me, like a guard dog protecting what was theirs.

Ran chuckled in my mind. *Great analogy,* she said, cackling.

I nearly rolled my eyes but refrained. *You do know it was* him *who came up with the guard dog analogy, right?*

She cackled over the bond.

I knew what was expected of me today, but I was still nervous. I could face a battle with dark mages with little thought, but facing a crowd of people made me want to pee my pants and barf my breakfast.

Dad set his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. He kissed my forehead and gave me a nod that said he was so very proud. And that meant the world to me. Jess clung to his leg, her big eyes watching me with hope, sadness, and joy. I leaned down and hugged her little body, breathing her in. She melted into me, her arms wrapping around my neck.

I had been so busy I had spent very little time with her and my family. It was time to change that. It was time to lead... by taking care of myself. I couldn't lead if I was lacking. Just as Shen couldn't have supported me without first finding healing.

This life was about living our best, finding our wings, and holding onto the morals of the Creator. For I had learned just how skewed my viewpoint could become.

“Kick butt,” Jacob said, stumbling over his own feet and barely avoiding a play dart from some of the rowdier kids in the crowd.

Anna smacked the back of his head, then turned to me as he glared and rubbed the spot. “Kick butt,” she repeated.

“Hey!” Jacob said, scowling. “That was my line!”

I felt something cold placed in my hands. I glanced down to see a mage stone with swirling letters. “Just in case,” Shen whispered in

my ear, making a shiver go down my spine.

He knew exactly what he was doing to me.

I didn't need this distraction at the moment, especially since part of me wanted to escape this and just let Shen hold me. I debated it, but when I went to lean back against him, he released me as if he hadn't just made my toes curl with his voice and the whisper of warm wind from his breath. But over the bond was an impish satisfaction. I stuck my tongue out at the cur of a werewolf, who merely met my eyes with a raised brow and mischief sparkling in his gaze.

Brat, I sassed. *Should we tell them of your feeding of a certain puppy…*

His eyes darkened, brows lowering, even as his lips twitched. *Should I tell them of how you threw yourself over a cliff to save said puppy?*

Mom would kill me.

Precisely.

I huffed out a breath of displeasure, but a smile was trying to cross my lips.

"Stinky dragon's breath," I whispered.

He grinned. "Careful, Carissimus, or I might take you to the chapel today," he said.

"What, insults make your heart patter?" I replied blithely, fluttering my eyelashes at him like I'd seen the girls at ale houses do. I felt like an idiot.

And based on his grin, I looked like it, too. "Only yours, stinky fenbutt," he teased.

I cracked a grin.

"You've stalled long enough, Luna. Be brave and show them the leader you know you are," he whispered into my ear, pushing me forward.

I rolled my eyes and grabbed his hand before he could disappear. If he was gonna tease, he was gonna join me, the cur.

Ran chuckled in my head.

I approached the crowds, Shen at my back and Fenbutt gamboling along beside him.

I stared out at those gathered. Those who had changed so much, given so much. They now stood side by side with creatures we once hunted for sport and the so-called greater good. There would still be problems ahead, but we would face them *together.*

"People and creatures of my tribe, family of my heart, we come together today to celebrate the lives and Gifts of those who left far too soon. They were here for a time, and we wish to remember them for how they lived and how they died. They lived for their families, for their people, and for their honor."

I paused, staring out at the pyres. "They died as heroes, protecting the very things we nearly lost: freedom, life, and honor. For many long years we have done a disservice to this world, spitting in the face of Source and all her Gifts. We forgot all we once knew and became the monsters we sought to conquer."

My fellow Reds hung their heads in shame. I felt their *needs* grating against my soul. "I have killed. I have broken families. I have lied, cheated, stole, and done every sin for the *greater good*. My hands run red with the blood of innocents and the guilty. But should I leave myself there, I would become but a faint shadow of who I could be. There is no rule in this world preventing us from becoming who we were always meant to be. We have broken sacred laws and we have been broken, but the only ones holding us back are ourselves. You can change. Today.

"Do not just take someone's word for things, research it. Find the truth in their words. Or the lies. Do not believe someone merely because they are older or because they are of higher rank. Find for yourselves the truth.

"The funny thing about facing hard truth is that it brings freedom where there is only fog. Bring to light those shameful things that are hidden. Do not avoid the hard things in life, and it will set you free. I stand before you today, a broken individual who murdered her own grandmother. If I can change, anyone can," I said with a wry smile. That brought a bit of a laugh from those who were more morbidly humorous.

"I stand before you today, a murderer of a very good man," Shen said, startling me. I blinked at him. I hadn't known he would speak.

Even I must maintain some secrets of the bond, Alia of the Reds, he said.

"What are you doing?" I whispered out of the corner of my mouth as I tried to maintain a sickly smile.

"Bring to light the shameful things. I will not have any further secrets someone can use against us, Carissimus," he said, gently kissing my forehead. He turned back to my people. "I am the one you know as Hood. I was trained from an early age to assassinate Reds. I killed a man in cold blood. You knew him as Sir Darius, Alia's grandfather."

Gasps came from my Reds. They hadn't known Hood was the one who killed my grandfather. Very few knew that sensitive information, and I'd planned to take it to my grave.

Whelp, that jackalfish is out of the bay, Ran whispered from where she watched in the woods, her keen eyes picking out the more murderous in the crowd.

Shen got to his knees before my people. "I have no right to ask, but I beg for forgiveness from those I harmed the most. Perhaps the damage the former matriarch inflicted could have been mitigated had this man been here."

I stepped forward to get between my agitated people and Shen, but he held up a hand, glancing up at me with eyes that implored me to let him do this. I didn't know if I could, but I stepped back. If anyone tried to harm him—

"And should you deem me guilty, I will take whatever punishment you wish to meet. Including death."

He's a bit dramatic, isn't he? Ran said.

You don't have to sound so gleeful about my beloved on his knees about to be swarmed by a bunch of werewolf assassins with a grudge, I replied.

"Son, I am the one who killed your father," a voice said. My dad stepped forward, his eyes glistening.

"Dad?" I gasped.

But Dad didn't hear me. He merely stopped before Shen and dropped to his knees, leveling himself with my beloved. "I am an old man with many crimes. Many more than your young years could

hold. If you ask forgiveness, then I should also beg it of you," Dad said. He bowed his head and gave Shen his neck in the wolven form of submission.

"I have ordered the death of a hundred werewolves, fifty mages, and two hundred unicorns," Elder Pulma said, his lips trembling as a tear dropped from his eye. He quickly wiped it away.

"I have killed thirty werewolves and ten mages," said Elder Vera. "I beg your forgiveness."

"I've killed two werewolves and a mage, I beg forgiveness," Jacob said, coming beside Dad and the elders. More came forward, admitting their crimes, and bowing before Shen.

Eventually, I and those who weren't Reds were the only ones standing.

I swallowed, but then I knelt before Shen. "I have killed thirty werewolves and sixty mages and thirty unicorns, I beg your forgiveness."

Shen

That did not go how I expected.

Alia knelt before me, submitting to my leadership. But she was my Luna. We were equals.

"Do not bow before me," I said, my voice choked. "I am no greater than the next, and my forgiveness means little. The one who we truly hurt is the Great King himself. And he is the only one who can bring us peace."

Latin emerged from every person who knelt on the ground.

"*Vita Source dimitte nobis."*

I glanced out at the people. At the Reds whom I had harmed. Whose father, brother, mother, son, or daughter had I killed?

The only way through this would be together. It would be hard, but it was possible. These people, despite what they had been through, were capable of great kindness even to a killer such as me.

They may have lost their way, but just like me, they admitted their wrongs and faced the consequences, all of them willing to change.

As Alia grabbed my hand and we both stood, it was to a new people. A people absolved of their guilt and ready to face a new future where we all could become better and *live*.

Alia

I COULDN'T RESIST the grin on my face. Nor my pride. My lovely, kind people.

I once thought they were too far for change to reach them. I once thought myself too far for change. But the proof was before me. We would be a people who protected the innocent and the weak and the less fortunate, no matter if they were human, werewolf, elf, nymph, unicorn, mage, or any other creature upon this planet.

"*Tutela vita fons,"* I said.

"*Fides familia,"* they replied.

I held up my hand and Ran jumped from the trees with a mighty roar that seemed to vibrate the very core of the earth.

The crowd ducked as I watched her bank and soar over my people. She flapped her wings, pausing in her flight as her chest glowed red between her glistening scales. She spat a streaming flame upon the massive pyre and the bodies that were laid there covered with gold-embroidered red blankets. Among those bodies was a woman bound in white—Shen's mother. Others were creatures of all kinds, from the smallest horned rabbit to the largest unicorn.

Ran released a second red stream at a second pyre stacked with rogue werewolves and dark mages and turned Reds who fell in the battle—and my grandmother.

The pyres were a cleansing. A way to burn away what was and commemorate those who'd been threads along our journey as we embraced the growth of today.

A cheer rose from behind me as I watched the pyres burn, shooting sparks high into the night sky. The crackle somehow soothed my soul.

"Graham, Sera," I began, reciting the names of each who'd given their lives. The people behind me were doing the same as we sent the bodies back to the earth as ash.

"They are no longer with us. They fly the skies of Seventh. *Sunt liberi*," I said, loud enough for everyone to hear.

"*Sunt liberi,"* repeated my people.

Epilogue

The water danced, its song sending a wave of peace through those gathered around her. The droplets were sent from high above, falling into a pool lined with luminescent blue and green mushrooms. Fairies with blue, purple, and orange wings fluttered from mushroom to mushroom, touching the round pads and tiny dots upon the surface of the glowing fungus.

No one quite knew what the fairies did nor why they were always found where bioluminescent mushrooms grew. But it was known that should the fairies disappear, so would the mushrooms.

Much as Source was the essence of all things, so too did all things work together to provide a habitable and even noteworthy existence upon the face of the planet. Source was what caused the sun to rise and the moon to share her light. Source was what gave of herself to provide a home for all creatures.

Nymphs dove into the depths of the pool, their faces coming up to grin at us before submerging once more. The boy nymph who I nearly killed splashed and played with the children of Ahhanhi and Anna’s children.

"Curo, what's with the hair? You never wear it down. You look old," Jess said, curling up her adorable little nose as she ran to me, gently pulling at my long, brown hair Shen liked to play with. She heard Brandt call me Curo and had since found it amusing, much to my lack of amusement.

Shen turned to me with a smile. "Curo?" he asked after hearing my little niece call me that.

My cheeks heated. “Don’t you dare, cur,” she hissed.

“Oh, yes I *dare*, *Curo*,” he said with a dragon-eating grin, humor coating the bond as he tucked that name away for future use. I glowered at him.

Ran roared from overhead, flinging out her wings to catch the air as she gently alighted on the ground. Jacob fell from her back, landing on his butt with a shrill scream.

"I'm *never* doing that again," he declared. He picked up his glasses that had tumbled from his face during the fall and stumbled over to a tree where a book lay.

He’ll be a dragon rider yet, Ran said, pride in her voice as she arched her neck and gave a shrill battle cry.

I raised a skeptical eyebrow but said nothing.

Fenbutt streaked from the water, coming to a halt before Anna. "Fenbutt, don't you dare—" She shrieked as Fenbutt shook his head first and then the rest of his body, splattering Anna and my parents with a load of water from his fur.

Brandt ducked behind a tree to escape the shower. But when he peaked his head around, Fenbutt shook again, bathing Brandt’s face and making him sputter.

I chuckled, my cheeks hurting from the smile that wouldn't leave my face.

“Fenbutt? Who named a hellhound *fenbutt*?” Brandt said, blinking rapidly to clear the water from his face as he stood guard over my sister. I'd assigned him to her personal guard, as he had been so gentle with her even when everyone else was calling for our deaths.

“The same person who named their horse *Ran,”* Shen replied, helpfully.

I snorted. “Says the one who named his werewolf *Wolf*,” I replied.

Brandt stared at us for a moment. He gagged. "You two—" He gagged again as words just wouldn't come. He walked away shaking his head, muttering about crazy lovebirds.

“What does Fenbutt mean?” Jess asked.

My cheeks heated.

"To pass a gas so extreme, it causes one to gag." Everyone turned to stare at Jacob, who lifted his gaze from the book he was studying and adjusted his glasses. "What?" he said as Jess giggled.

"Fenbutt, Fenbutt, Fenbutt!" Fina cried, much to the delight of the puppy dancing about in the water before her with his tongue hanging out as he chased fairies and nymphs and my nieces.

I looked up at Shen, who was already staring down at me with a gentleness in his eye that made my insides melt.

"I love you, my brave, murderous Red," he whispered into my ear. The strength of it came over the bond, wrapping around my soul like a purring kitten.

I leaned back against him, watching my family play in the pool, lounge on the sides, and, in Mom and Dad's case, hold hands as they smiled into each other's eyes with tears running down their faces to match mine.

Once upon a time, I wasn't sure we all would make it here. So many times I'd thought we'd lost it all.

But the only time you lose everything is when you stop fighting for it.

Here we were. Happy. Alive. Living. And most of all, healing.

I'd learned to delegate, to take time for myself and enjoy things without putting others' *needs* before my own. Shen was growing into himself, figuring out how to be who he wanted to be instead of what others had pushed on him. Anna was learning how to use her Gift to help me weed out those who would harm our family from within. Jacob was… Jacob. Still picking locks and finding out secrets no one wanted him to know, but his heart was in the right place.

Mom and Dad were enjoying retirement, spoiling their grandkids, and supporting me as two more members of my council. They had so many great ideas, and the people of the tribe really looked up to them as the best warriors of their generation.

My tribe was… adjusting. Shen and I were taking them on different kinds of hunts. Most times there was still magic involved, but not to the extent of before. Now we took down evil others ignored. Powerful leaders who abused their partners or children,

smugglers who took advantage of orphans, and fighting rings with supernatural creatures forced into death matches.

And it was working. My Reds were happy. Content that they were still making a difference. My biggest problem wasn't my Reds, but the civilians who were having to get used to living alongside the werewolves from Shen's pack who were moving in as their Alpha spent more time in my tribe. That and the creatures who came with *needs* and then didn't want to leave. Like the sphinx and her little one. They had found a cavern nearby and often visited the city for playdates with unicorn foals.

Shen gave the ruling title to his sister after his mother's pack had become his. Said he didn't want it and would rather stay by my side. So Beatrice became the ruling princess after their mother. Shen had given many of his werewolves who came to help us the choice: they could be transferred to his sister or remain under his leadership. The pack was split, but then Beatrice did something unexpected.

She submitted to Shen.

That meant, technically, Shen was over them all, but Beatrice just kinda ruled in his stead.

That was an entire week and a half of craziness that I do not want to relive. Shen nearly killed his sister a few more times before he realized that being the leader she'd always wanted would be a worse punishment, and that I wouldn't let him kill her.

Beatrice might've almost—*Almost?* Shen hissed into my mind, and I blew a raspberry at him for listening to my thoughts—killed me, but she was still his sister. And she was in a good place to make a difference, if she so chose.

Then there was the matter of the creatures with *needs.* They still came, being drawn to me. And I still helped them. We had lookouts who would bring them in from the woods, address their *needs*, and then send them home. And we had mages now. Some of the black mages had returned after the battle, seeking succor and a place to live a meaningful life. We put them to work helping those they'd harmed most of their lives.

Most of the unicorns went back into the woods after the battle, but a few chose to remain in the city. And they didn't murder

humans anymore, so that was a positive. One time I saw Ran with one, and the unicorn nodded as if conversing with her. She wouldn't say anything except she was talking with an old friend when I asked.

Life wasn't perfect, but it was imperfectly beautiful.

I held out my arm with the mate mark. The purple hue of its mountainous land with the moon and willow tree.

Shen held out his left arm and where our forearms touched, it made a complete circle. The top half of the willow tree on one side matched with the roots of a willow on his side. And on his side was a sun shining down on an arid desert. If you looked just so, it was almost as if the sun's rays created the wings of a butterfly. The mark was beautiful, but it was only made whole with both of us.

When our marks met in the middle, one of light and one of dark, they created just what was needed for the trees to grow.

"It takes both rain and sunshine for a tree to grow," Shen whispered.

I smiled up at him, tilting my head to kiss his chin. He spun so I caught his lips instead. He chuckled as I gasped, his lips closing over mine in a sweet peck that went beyond the mere physical plane and zapped my soul. He pulled back, but I reached up and grabbed his doublet, pulling him down for more than a mere peck.

Anna cheered, Brian groaned, and my cheeks grew red even as I lost myself in Shen's arms.

A chuckle rose from my lips, and Shen broke the kiss. He was breathing hard, his breath tickling my forehead as I leaned against him.

"What are you laughing about?" he asked, his voice amused and bemused all at once.

"Would you ever have imagine this? That we'd end up *here*." I gestured around us, to the joy and happiness, then to our wrists where the Mate Bond lay. "I freakin' kidnapped a prince who happened to be the man I wanted to kill—"

His grin was dragon-eating as he nuzzled my neck. "Too bad you fell for the werewolf you were destined to kill. Now you get to live with me," he said. But he turned serious at my *look.* "I am thankful, Little Red. For all the trials. You may not have known I was Hood,

but in any other circumstance, one of us would have died. But you were too stubborn to kill just any old werewolf, and I was too intrigued to kill the little werewolf killer who showed compassion in every bone of her body, even if you *did* stab me." I poked his ribs and he chuckled, grabbing my hand before I reached for a blade. "Worry not, Little Red, I've loved you from the moment you stabbed me."

"My blade stole your heart?" I teased.

He winced. "Painfully."

I elbowed him even as my shoulders shook with laughter I tried to contain. He kissed my forehead and I smiled, snuggling back against the werewolf I loved.

THIS ISN'T *EXACTLY* A HAPPILY EVER AFTER. It's not a fairytale, after all. It's a tale of two people who came together and learned how to put up with each other and that life was better with the family they chose.

Legend says the Curo Duo were still roaming the streets of Mongolia's cities terrorizing criminals and arguing about who had sharper blades.

They'd become legends, but legends were easy to pass away as fairytales that would later be altered so much they would become an entirely dissimilar legend.

Little Red Riding Hood lived on in our hearts, and so Alia and Shen would live on, just as they had back in those days: together, in each other's arms, until the end of time.

Author Note

Dear Reader

Thank you so much for reading Empowering the Wolf's Heart. I hope it brought you joy and left you with a warm heart.

If you would be so kind as to leave a review on Amazon, Goodreads, or elsewhere, it would mean so much to me. In fact, it means so much for you to take the time out of your day that I try to read each and every one.

It can be just a few short sentences, so please don't overthink it (speaking as a lifelong overthinker here!) but it truly makes the outpouring of my heart and soul on these pages so very worth it. Even a rating goes a long way in helping other readers like you find books to enjoy.

I always adore hearing from my readers! Email me at agbentleyauthor@icloud.com. I try to reply to each message and I treasure them all. Don't forget to follow me on Instagram, as well!

Well wishes and happy reading,

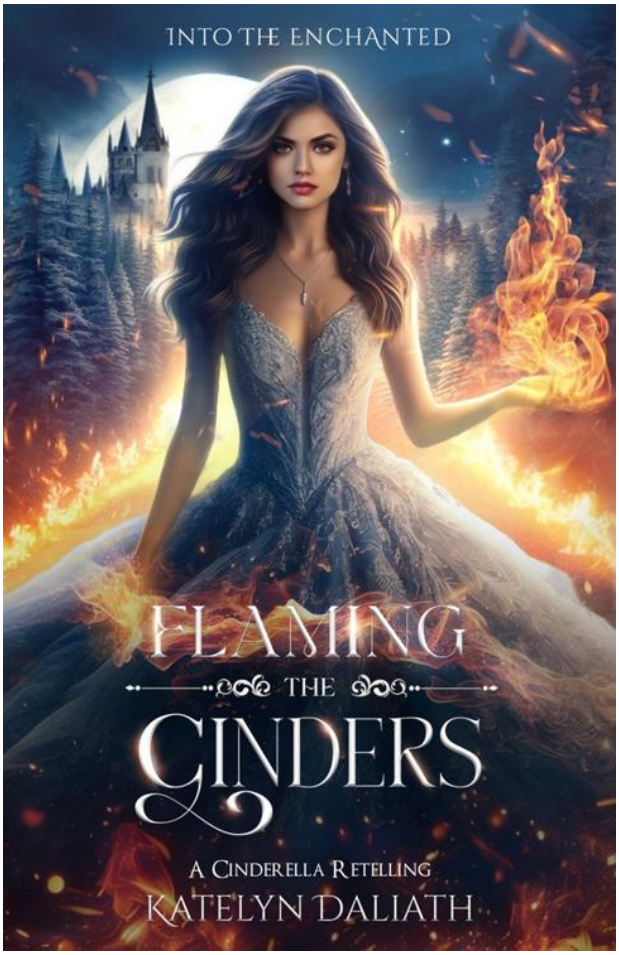
Ava Grace

Free Short Story

P.S. Want to see Alia propose? Sign up to my newsletter for a free short story!
Please **click here** to be taken directly to my website to get more of Alia and Shen.

Read on for a sneak peek

"You are cunning."
"Oh darling, I prefer wicked."



[Click here: Flaming the Cinders]

Chapter 1

"Estora! What's taking you so long with the fire? You do the same thing every day, and you're supposed to be an expert by now. Stop dawdling and hurry up. We haven't got all day."

Her stepmother's demanding voice grated on Estora's nerves, making her want to stick out her tongue—like always. The urge to retort and defy Francesca was a part of her daily routine.

Estora made a face at the kitchen hearth she sat by, her back to her stepmother so she couldn't see her annoyance or struggle with making the fire.

Well, she was an expert at making fire, but not with flint and steel. She didn't even know how to use them, no matter how many years it had been since she had taken over the kitchen duties.

Why use flint and steel or any other source when her own way was better and quicker?

But her stepmother didn't know that. No one did. And she couldn't do it while she wasn't alone.

"Mother, I cannot do this anymore! Look at my hands! And look at this. It's so sticky—look, look, look, ugh! It's so irritating. Why do I even have to do this?" Lucinda, her older stepsister, cried in outrage. She was kneading dough for bread—or trying to. "You said you'd raise me as a proper lady, and a proper lady does not bake cakes! And look at my gown!"

Estora didn't need to turn around to imagine Lucinda's appearance. The girl knew nothing about kneading and could probably bathe herself in flour.

She barely held back a snort.

This was ridiculous. If her stepsister were trying to help her, she would've found her presence touching. But no, Lucinda was there, making bread, because her mother insisted she learn something about cooking—all because of the young duke Francesca had eyed for her daughter.

The duke had recently become known for his humility, often mingling with his servants and even cooking for himself at times. He lived in a grand estate near the town, and he sought a wife who shared his modest nature—or so the town's gossip went.

Ever since hearing this, Francesca had insisted Lucinda learn cooking and gardening—the duke loved gardening—as necessary.

All of this was rubbish to Estora.

They had never met the duke, yet Francesca had already declared him the one for her eldest daughter, insisting Lucinda must be like him in order to pursue him at the upcoming ball at his estate. Lucinda was up for pursuing—in fact, she had been blabbering about the duke she had never seen—but she hated getting her hands dirty.

"Are you a senseless child? Must I tell you a thousand times for your brain to absorb it? Now be a good girl and do as you're told without another word."

Estora's stepmother was harsh even with her own daughters, and deep inside, Estora thought Lucinda deserved it. The girl had put her through a lot of mental torture since her father's departure.

Francesca turned her attention to Estora. "And you. Do I need to repeat myself a thousand times to hurry up? You do this every day, and you haven't learned yet? If you're slowing down out of envy towards your sister's bright future, I will not permit you to come to the market with us today."

Estora's jaw dropped slightly. Envy? Bright future?

Francesca was an utter fool.

Estora felt only pity for whoever would end up with the duke—even her insufferable stepsister. Somehow, the people had forgotten

that the duke had been in the royal dungeons for committing a crime that was still unknown. It had only been a few months since he returned home, suddenly all too humble towards commoners. It was all a ruse to polish his ruined reputation. Couldn't people just see that?

"It usually takes a while to make the fire. I'm trying my best," Estora said, forcing calm into her voice. But she suddenly felt nervous. What if Francesca and Lucinda didn't leave the kitchen, and she couldn't use her fire? Would Francesca suspect something when she didn't succeed with the flint and steel?

"And I really don't mind if I don't get to see the prince, Stepmother," she added. "I shall happily stay behind and tend to the hens."

Francesca muttered something about a foolish girl and cinders as she turned away.

Estora struck the flint against the steel, but instead of sparks, only a few feeble glimmers appeared. She sighed, frustrated.

How do people do this every day?

"Mother! Mother!" Twelve-year-old Linette's voice echoed into the kitchen, followed by her stomping, hurried footsteps. "The prince is coming! He'll be passing by any minute! We must hurry, or we'll miss him! Everyone's leaving already!"

Estora was certain the whole household heard her, except there was no one else but the four of them. There had been a time when servants bustled around the house and gardeners laughed as they worked, but Francesca had sent them all away, unable to pay them while also caring for Estora's father's treatments.

Her stepmother and stepsisters fled the room in the next two minutes, gushing about making good appearances and catching the prince's eye. Estora barely restrained herself from asking, 'Where is the duke now?'

Thanking the Creator for their absence, Estora put away the flint and steel and rose to her feet with a relieved sigh.

She stretched her hand slightly towards the hearth and summoned her powers. Warmth enveloped within her, her fingertips

burning. Flames leaped out of her hands, landing on the sticks and tinder, igniting them instantly. The fire spread quickly.

Her fire never hurt her. Normal fire could, but not hers; it was a part of her being—part of herself she dreaded exploring more. She only used her powers to start the hearth fire.

Fire was a dangerous element, and she was scared of what it could do if uncontrolled.

Estora backed away from the hearth, realizing only then that she shouldn't have lit it. They were heading for the market, and the wood would be wasted. Even though the fire was hers, she didn't know how to stop it or if she could.

Not even water could put it out—she had tried that several times. When everything turned to ashes, the fire would stop on its own.

Estora turned away, her eyes landing on her dear diary on the kitchen slab. She smiled softly.

Not only were her powers secret, but so was her diary. And she had sworn to herself that no one would ever find out about either.

***

By the time Estora entered the market, it was flooded with people, buzzing with so much excitement that she found herself rolling her eyes now and then.

Only five months ago, these people were less fond of the prince. But after he formed an alliance with their neighboring country, long considered an enemy, their affection for him grew back immediately.

Who knows the ways of these people? She thought as she pushed her way through the crowd, scanning the area to find her one and only friend. She had no interest in seeing the prince; she was here to see her friend.

Estora loved being outdoors, but at the same time, she disliked it. Fear took hold of her whenever she was surrounded by people, making her feel exposed. She was always on her guard, careful not to meet anyone's eyes, even though her father, when he was alive,

had assured her that no one remembered the sign to distinguish a normal human from someone born with magic; their eyes.

Every mage had eyes the color of flames and people used to recognize them by this, but that was a thousand years ago. There was not a single mage left in the world except for her; the mage lineage had ended when every one of them perished in the Blood War, save for her ancestor who had managed to escape.

Since the war and its impact—half of the country destroyed and many lives lost—on the normal people, they declared their hatred towards mages, though none remained. Not even a child from the magic bloodline.

For generations, people told stories about the Blood War to their children and passed down their hatred. The mages' unusual eyes were once part of the story, but not since the last century. Everyone had mysteriously forgotten that particular detail.

According to her father, his great-grandfather, who had the power to sense enchantments, claimed that the people had been enchanted to forget about it, though he couldn't identify who was responsible.

The question remained unanswered. Only Estora's ancestor had survived the war of the mages, so who could have done it?

There was really no reason for her to fear. She could hold her head high and meet others' gazes, but somehow, she still dreaded it.

Estora found her friend Lily on a raised platform where the stalls were lined, with her hands on her hips and eyes narrowed at someone.

With every corner of the market occupied and the crush of bodies pressing in around her, it was not easy to move forward. But she pushed her way through anyway, earning herself many glares.

"I wonder who has done what to deserve that hawkish look of yours," Estora mused as she joined her friend's side, a smile teasing her lips.

Startled, Lily turned around, a hand pressed against her chest. "Estora, hello to you too. What a way to greet your friend whom you haven't seen in two weeks." She feigned a hurtful expression, though her eyes lit up in amusement.

Estora grinned, her first genuine smile in weeks. “And what an eager way to wait for your friend, glaring at someone. May I know who troubles you?”

Lily shot her a serious look but failed to suppress her smile. “I am not troubled, dear friend. I’m merely trying to help the guards find the thief, not that they asked for it, of course. Oh! Haven’t you heard?” Lily asked, seeing Estora’s confused face. “The thief in the palace kitchen! The guards failed to catch her, and she managed to escape. It’s a girl, by the way. And I was wondering whether that’s her.”

Estora followed Lily’s gaze to the girl she had been observing. The young girl stood next to a group of noblewomen who couldn’t stop giggling and fluttering their fans. But only a few seconds later, she was shoved away from their side.

Estora had only seen the noblewomen a handful of times before, but she disliked them greatly for how they looked down on commoners and how loudly they gushed about their gowns and jewels.

“What makes you think it’s her? If it were her, honestly, she wouldn’t be here.”

“I know, but for the last few weeks, she’s been talking and daydreaming about the food served at the castle.”

“I’m pretty sure everyone dreams about the food at the castle, Lil. Besides, from what you’ve told me about her family, she’s really poor, so of course, she’d talk about it.”

Lily sighed. “You are right. If she were the thief, she wouldn’t be here to see the crown prince.”

Estora turned to her, eyebrows rising. “You mean the crownless prince?”

“Make way, make way! Make way for His Royal Highness!” a voice cried out suddenly, overpowering the noise of the crowd.

Four guards came into sight, parting the way for the prince, and pushing people to each side. But with countless people gathered, all they could form was a narrow path between the sidelines. Excited whispers rippled through the multitude, and soon the whole place was filled with cheers when the prince seemed to step into sight.

Estora craned her neck for a glimpse, but she couldn't see him yet. The shouts, claps, and cheers pierced her ears and she clasped her hands over them, though, that barely helped. Lily copied her, and both girls exchanged insufferable glances before bursting into laughter. Only they seemed to find the noise unbearable.

After a few intolerable minutes, the prince came into view, riding a majestic white horse, his figure striking contrast against the backdrop of the marketplace. He sat regally, offering a wide, easy smile to everyone. The crowd of women swooned at it.

Estora dropped her hands and snorted, rolling her eyes at the people.

Prince Axel had been born and raised as the crown prince. However, he was selfish and unkind to his people—at least that's what people said—and the king had removed him from his title and given it to his younger brother instead.

Since then, Prince Axel hadn't been seen outside the castle. Rumor had it that he locked himself in his room. However, five months later, he somehow made peace with their neighboring country, Arozonth, and impressed everyone in his own country, earning back their favor.

Now, he had returned from Arozonth after signing an alliance. He had declared that upon his return, he would visit every village in the capital and beyond.

Prince Axel was young and very handsome—Estora had to admit begrudgingly, but the notion of swooning over him was out of the question. That very thought irritated her as much as the giggling and flirtatiously smiling girls surrounding her did.

The prince rode at a leisurely pace, taking his time to look at each and every person he passed by, which indeed surprised Estora. The last time the royal family had visited, they barely looked at anyone. Perhaps they had been in a hurry. However, this prince swept his gaze slowly over the crowd as if he wanted to remember every face of his admiring people.

What was he up to? It was not like the people could give him back the title of crown prince.

Petals were thrown at him, and the noblewomen across the road swooned dramatically, their hands flying to their chests, and one of them even fainted—or feigned to—when the prince smiled at her.

Prince Axel was now directly within Estora's sight. His eyes scanned the crowd Estora stood nearby and met hers.

He froze.

His smile froze.

He halted his slowly trotting horse.

Estora's breath caught in her throat. After a frozen second, she tore her eyes away from his. Fear clenched her heart, and she tensed wildly for a moment before regaining her composure, masking her anxiety. She suddenly found the cobblestone road very interesting—indeed more interesting than the prince, and she was sure she stared at it for a long moment, trying to control the sudden storm brewing inside her.

After the prince had moved on, Estora lifted her gaze again, but almost as soon as she looked at his retreating figure, the prince turned his head. His now-piercing, intense eyes met hers, and Estora looked away again with a start.

For a while, she couldn't breathe properly.

No, he couldn't have recognized her. There was no way anyone could know. Yet, when he looked at her, his entire demeanor had changed, as if he saw her secret, as if he knew those eyes and was shocked by them.

His gaze left her feeling exposed.

Could he have recognized her? But her father had assured her that no one, not even the royal family, remembered the eyes of mages. The memory had been wiped from everyone's mind.

Then why had the prince gone still when he saw her?

Estora recalled her father's assurances over and over again, but unlike before, they didn't help. Whether she wanted to believe it or not, she knew he had seen her.

And it was no longer safe to be outside, she realized with growing fear. What if the prince sent his guards to arrest her now?

She quickly made an excuse to Lily and hurried home.

Only when Estora reached her house and shut the door behind her did she realize she wasn't safe there either. She was not safe anywhere. The prince could send his guards and drag her from any corner of the country.

The realization hit her hard and her world took on a dark turn.

Click here: Flaming the Cinders

Into the Enchanted

Into the Enchanted is a standalone collection of no-spice fairytale retellings where magic-born heroines discover their happily ever after. Brimming with magic, mystery, twists, and swoon-worthy moments, these full-length novels can be enjoyed in any order!

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Those who made this possible

The words on these pages began with just God and my overactive imaginary friends, but that is far from how it got *here*.

It grew to what it is today because of so many people. Nearly too many to name! But I will do be best, because each and every one of you mean more than I can ever say.

To Mom and Dad—your belief in me from my very first breath inspired the loving family within the pages of this book. I hope you can see yourselves through my eyes and one day realize that your perfectly imperfect selves were blessings God used to mold me into who I am today. You two were my first examples of healthy relationships, both to each other and those around you. You love deeply and unconditionally, and that helped me love myself unconditionally, too.

To my sisters: I can never express how thankful I am for you two. You both have come through Sixth and back to become the women you are today. You are my inspiration. Thank you for always being willing to talk me through depression, anxiety, and guy problems. You two are BAs and don't you forget it.

To my niece and nephews who are always pressing me for more books to read, you are the reason I can rise with a smile on my face. You make me laugh daily and are perfectly imperfect chaos whom I love with all my soul.

To my grandmother, who as soon as she learned I was publishing a book, said she wanted my first signed copy under her Christmas tree. You remind me of how God placed beautiful people on this earth just to remind us that there is still good here. And your strength of will and heart for Jesus is one of the most inspiring things I can ever imagine. When I grow up, I wanna be just like you.

To my bestie who listened to me slog through hours of 'this is the greatest book that's ever been written' to 'this is the worse book in the history of humanity': thank you. You kept me sane. You are my Ran.

To my editor, Danny. Girl, I thought I knew what I was doing until you took this book into your capable hands. Your encouragement, knowledge, and absolute love for Alia and Shen and their journey turned this into something beautiful. I am so grateful for you, beyond what words could ever express. God knew what He was doing when he stuck a floundering author in your path! I wanted this book to touch hearts, and yet God used you to touch mine. Thank you.

To Katelyn and Karen—oh heck I'm tearing up. Without you two, this book would not be here. But more than that, you two have become my sister's from another Father, strong encouragers who kept me going through hours of writing, and turned this into a lovely experience I will never forget. Karen, thank you for taking a chance on a newbie and making me the thirteenth. Katelyn, I am forever in awe of your book cover skills and the way you brighten my day with your messages. God sent you both into my life for such a time as this. ILYSM.

To my beta readers: Alissa, Alice, and Eleanor. Thank you for your guidance, encouragement, and love for the words on these pages. You guys truly gave your all for this work and made it so much better.

To my lovely ARC Team: you guys rock. The way I smiled receiving your messages and love for Alia and Shen—I still tear up thinking of you guys. You gave me the final encouragement I needed to push through the last round of edits. I love you guys.

To my followers on Instagram: each and every like, comment, and message has made my cheeks hurt from smiling. And the many lovely authors I've met along the way who have become friends—you guys are such inspirations and will always be in my heart.

To everyone else who has listened, encouraged, supported, uplifted, prayed, and so many other things I can't even name, thank you. It truly takes a village to publish a book, and I am so very grateful for each and every person who has crossed my path because of this.

To Jesus, the One who holds my heart, thank You for always being the bestest friend a girl could have.

And to my readers—this book is nothing without you. You are why I get up in the morning excited to place more words on a page. Thank you for joining Alia and Shen on their journey. I hope you know how amazing you are, how very loved you are, and how much better the world is because you're here.

All my love and deepest gratitude to each and every one of you.

I hope this book helped you find your wings. ;3